

HISTORY IN THE DISCURSIVE CONDITION

Reconsidering the tools of thought

Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth



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History in the Discursive Condition

This is a major text, a key intervention in a book length format into one of the most discussed areas of intellectual and historical thinking today, with the stylish and incisive arguments that we have come to expect from Elizabeth Ermarth.

Keith Jenkins, *University of Chichester, UK*

This book is unusual and unusually powerful in its argument, its argumentation, and its potential impact . . . Ermarth's ability to discuss, with lucidity and elegance, the most complex of ideas is what will make the book work for both a specific academic audience and a more general informed readership . . . Ermarth thinks big. She also thinks deeply. She knows her way around all the complex debates of the last 30 years and articulates them with clarity and often pointed critique. It is quite simply a really important book.

Linda Hutcheon, *University of Toronto, Canada*

In this bold new book, Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth traces the broadly established challenges to modernity that now confront historians and citizens of Western societies generally. She puts forward a clear definition of both the Modern Condition and of the Discursive Condition that challenges it, and she briefly introduces the most important practical implications of those challenges to accepted definitions and tools of thought.

After decades of conflicting work on related issues, this book provides a succinct, lucid, and wide-ranging discussion of what is at stake. Drawing on a broad range of intellectual and cultural history, from Homer to Hayden White and from the arts to physics, philosophy, and politics, this book defines a new stage in the history of ideas. With the practice and assumptions of historians at its core, the book demonstrates the importance of interdisciplinary practice in addressing the big questions currently confronting the humanities and social sciences.

Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, University of Edinburgh, UK, and Trent University, Canada, teaches and writes about interdisciplinary cultural history and theory.

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Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth

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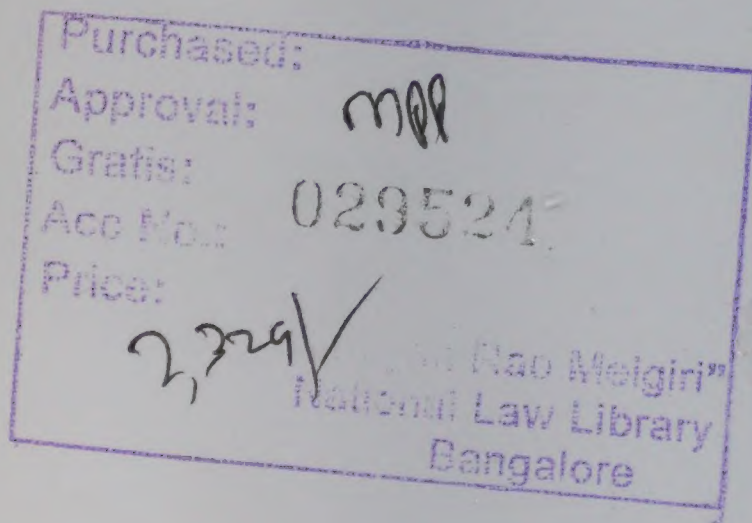
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Some of my claims here rest on extended arguments about modernity and postmodernity that I have developed over more than two decades, always in cross-disciplinary terms. It would be impossible to recapitulate those arguments here but they do underwrite the present argument and should be mentioned, particularly two books, *Realism and Consensus* (1983; 1998) and *Sequel to History* (1992). Chapters 3 and 4 have been published elsewhere in slightly different forms, Chapter 3 partly in *New Literary History* 31: 3 (Summer, 2000), 405–419, and partly in *History and Theory* 40 (December 2001), 34–58; and Chapter 4 in *Time and Society* (U.K.) 4: 1 (February 1995), 91–110. With thanks to Alun Munslow for the reproduction of Figures 1–3 from Ermarth, Elizabeth Deeds (2010) “Time is Finite: The implications for history”, *Rethinking History*, 14:3, pp. 321–341. Lyrics for *Ac-cent-tchu-ate the Positive* by Arlen/Mercer reproduced with permission from Warner Chappell Music Ltd. Parts of other publications sometimes appear here highly rewritten and reorganized so I list them as sources: “Ethics and Method” in *History and Theory* 43 (December 2004), 61–83; “Finger Exercises: Parody as a Practice for Postmodernity,” in *European Journal of English Studies* 3: 2 (1999), 226–240, reprinted in G.R.A.A.T. (Tours/Paris) no. 21 (1999), pp. 177–89; “Perspective and Consensus,” in Part One of *Realism and Consensus* (Princeton, 1983); 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998); “Time and Neutrality: The Media of Modernity in a Postmodern World,” in S. Lash, A. Quick, R. Roberts Eds., *Time and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp.197–209.

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Introduction: Get over it

The aim of this book is to encourage substantial rethinking of the foundational challenges to modernity. During its more than half a millennium what I'm calling the Modern Condition has sponsored an impressive variety of related accomplishments: cartography, exploration, empirical science and philosophy, humanism, printing, religious reformation, representation in politics, and art. That range of accomplishment was based upon certain assumptions that have now, many centuries later, been challenged at their foundation: not frivolously but in the course of regular practice in language studies, anthropology, theoretical physics, philosophy, music, visual art, politics, information and communications technologies, literature, film, to name a few. These challenges appeared first in isolated cases and now, more than a century later, so extensively as to suggest a shift from incremental to paradigmatic change: change not just in the structure of capital, or in technology, or in the style of buildings, but in the whole culture that still informs most of our lives in a million unspoken and determining ways. That culture is being asked to shift from a knowledge paradigm based on objectification to one based on systemic understanding. The model for systemic analysis that has been accepted in many academic fields has been language as defined by Ferdinand de Saussure in the first decade of the twentieth century. The resulting challenges have appeared in cognate forms across the disciplinary range from physics and art to politics to philosophy and these challenges are not limited to academic disciplines but also appear across the range of practice beyond universities and think tanks. To these cognate challenges this book gives the name of Discursive Condition, a term coined to invoke the multi-systemic condition that in so many ways is replacing the common denominator universe of modernity. The range and variety of these cognate changes suggest paradigmatic mutation.

Our tools of thought have not kept up. While actual practical circumstances have moved away from the practices and assumptions of modernity, our tools of thought have not substantially changed and remain the tools forged in and for modernity, some of them several centuries ago. This book addresses that problem.

Like many others, I have used the terms “postmodernism” and “post-modernity” in my previous work to indicate new directions, but such terms have lost value from too little specificity or too much contradictory and careless usage. The term “postmodern” is primarily a chronological marker and as such depends on the definition of “modern”; and about that definition disagreement is substantial. Some trace it to Italy and the 1400s, some to industrialization and the 1700s, some claim it has always been with us. In North America treatment of the “post-modern” has too often been trivializing, dismissive, inadequate, and in some influential forms, even reactionary. Assuming as I do that there is something important at stake, I think the experts on the “postmodern” who are responsible for this trivializing have a lot to answer for. I have avoided the temptation to name names on the assumption that, as a British historian once put it, a colleague is not an Amalekite, to be smitten hip and thigh, so in the interest of collegiality, smiting is out. But it must be said that in North America, dogmatic and regressive responses have succeeded in suppressing rather than encouraging efforts to find out what is at stake in the cultural sea change that by now is given and undeniable. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, to ignore or dismiss or trivialize that challenge is profoundly impractical and probably immoral. The departure from modernity is no small thing – not merely a matter of getting over “modernism” nor of welcoming “late capitalism” and its supposed validation of Marx’s ticket, nor of doing battle with “virtuality.” The departure from modernity signals a tectonic change radical enough to suggest that even the tools of thought must change if we are to keep up with ourselves in any vital or creative way.

This book argues for more experimental work with method, particularly by historians and cultural interpreters. Interdisciplinary work is central to that project. I can summarize the reasons with a familiar anecdote: the one about the four blind men making limited discoveries concerning the essence of an elephant depending on which part of the creature they touch (ear, trunk, leg, tail). The anecdote shows how a single approach to knowledge is at once accurate and insufficient. However, a more practical, less conventional reading of the anecdote is that such insufficiency can have serious consequences for the elephant which is still there even though the limited experts do not know that, and which can’t be nourished if nobody can recognize it. All this is a metaphor for disciplinary knowledge at the turn of the twenty-first century: it is necessary but insufficient for understanding the problems Western cultures face. Whatever the key problems are with regard to my topic – and there are very different estimates of them – we are not going to respond to them creatively if we continue to know only this or that feature of a structure that remains largely invisible. Interdisciplinary work increasingly appears essential to achieving reliable knowledge concerning the immense and immediate problems of an over-populated, under-hydrated, lethally warming planet. While everyone is for interdisciplinary knowledge (as long as it doesn’t cost anything), having workable suggestions about, or examples of, how actually

to do interdisciplinary work is more rare; because of various institutional and funding limitations, what passes for “interdisciplinary” work is often a splicing activity that merely recycles long familiar methods and terms. That in turn means that discipline-bound methodologies continue to do cultural analysis in restrictive ways that actually hamper investigation by ignoring the terms in which method operates. If I approach Picasso’s achievement only in terms of art history, and Saussure’s only in terms of linguistics, the disciplinary focus would prevent me from seeing the congruences between them. Specialized disciplinary knowledge is necessary but not sufficient to that task. In writing about a topic such as literary realism, some of the most useful sources I know for explaining its cultural import are books by people working in quite diverse fields: by a Metropolitan Museum curator working on Renaissance perspective; by a philosopher of science writing on epistemology; by a sociologist writing an archaeology of knowledge, by the author(s) of *The Iliad*. Thinking from more than one *methodological* vantage point is an emphasis that changes the outcomes not only in academic writing but in the lives of students taking university courses and acquiring methodological tools of thought that go unremarked as such.

The trivialization of postmodernity by prominent “experts” in the English-speaking world has worked mainly to the detriment of the English-speaking world. Certainly societies dedicated to empiricism can expect to have a hard time with challenges to the tools of thought inherited from empiricism but, after a century of such challenges, that alibi weakens; it is no longer acceptable or even practical to deny that big change has overtaken Western societies and the tools of thought need to be reconsidered. Get over it. New conditions require new tools of thought, even if only for the purpose of preserving or re-tooling long-standing values. That means tectonic change, methodological change: change not just in “ideas” or “conclusions” and not just by adopting new vocabulary, but change in the entire way of going and that includes processes and terminologies that we assume without question. The challenge to modernity is evident from the middle of the nineteenth century at least. To their everlasting credit certain theorists have in their disparate ways attempted and encouraged the kind of methodological innovation that paradigmatic change calls for (for example, Roland Barthes, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, Diane Elam, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Keith Jenkins, Kathleen Stewart, Hayden White, editors at such journals as *History and Theory*, *New Literary History*, *Rethinking History*). Perhaps one day even professional organizations will see it in their self-interest to follow suit.

The discussion in this book covers territory that will seem familiar to some academic experts. However that familiarity, as I argue more extensively in Part I, has too often fostered only the recycling of familiar methods and terms (same pulpit, different texts) without ever taking seriously and pursuing to its full extent the accumulating challenges to modernity. Those challenges cannot be avoided despite the decades of publications assuming they can and must; as one such publication claims in its choice of epigraph: may the defenders

of objectivity and impartiality “go down with our flags flying.” For this author objectivity is a “posture” not a cultural product (Novick, 1988, vii, p. 415) and a posture that seems like playroom heroics in a metaphor vaguely suggestive of Lord Nelson at Trafalgar. The changes in play are by now comprehensive and no longer recoverable in terms of long-familiar practices, or explanatory habits of mind. Get over it. Looking steadily at the fact of the Discursive Condition requires experimental action: new terms, new language, new tools of thought, and not for their own sake as some hopelessly and unnecessarily difficult writing has seemed to suggest, but precisely for finding practical new ways to deal adequately with practical problems. A collective and collected effort is called for beginning with agreement about what is the problem being addressed, and leading to methodological experiment and re-alignment.

One would have to wait a century or more in order to grasp fully what is at stake in the challenge to modernity. Within the incompleting process, however, comparative methods can nevertheless register the outlines of cultural change. That is what this book does. Its central contrast between the Modern Condition and the Discursive Condition in no way suggests two discrete cultural continents but instead overlapping systemic operations with significant incompatibilities. It is not an either/or situation except for the exigencies of defining terms for a heady if confusing time where new opportunity and systemic contradiction go hand in hand.

The creation of new tools of thought are not the work of a moment or even of short-term discussion and decision, but instead the work of time and patience through the requisite experimental failures and successes. Modernity took centuries to develop and so will its successor. Relativity theory was not conceived as a way of challenging modernity but as the solution to a problem. So was Saussure’s vision of language. So was Picasso’s vision of painting. Seeing the congruences requires new tools. There is no point in translating the challenges to modernity back into the language of modernity. The all-too-familiar terms only insure that no one will grasp the problem and the status quo will be preserved. The challenge to modernity opens an opportunity to decipher the established signs of tectonic cultural change that exist across the range of practice and beckon in new directions. What is needed now is some agreement, and perhaps even some renewed sense of urgency, about what practical problems arise from this situation and how best to address them.

History in the Discursive Condition: Reconsidering the Tools of Thought addresses these matters to a new kind of audience that includes both academic specialists and also a generally educated public. It addresses specialists who are fed up with the knowledge silos in universities still vigorously at work hampering intellectual experiment and adventure. It addresses educated grown-ups who understand that something has happened to the familiar conventions of thought, and who want to know more about that fact without having to become specialists. While the issues are quite familiar in some academic contexts, “knowing” about the challenge to modernity is not the same thing

as dealing with it. *Knowing is not an action*. In the empiricist tradition knowing is even a distancing of action in favor of perspective. The challenge to modernity cannot be understood using the perspective-based tools of modernity. Dealing with it requires methodological actions. Artists can prompt such action, but cultural renewal depends upon the rest of us.

A particular visual image remains with me as an emblem of the increasingly urgent problem addressed here: the problem of effectively confronting current cultural challenges armed only with tools of thought that were forged half a millennium ago. Take, for example, the issue of sustainability. I have long wondered why the cause of environmental preservation has been such a hard sell in the United States. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) appeared half a century ago, and the first Club of Rome Report (1972) is four decades old. Environmental degradation clearly influences every man woman and child on the planet. It seemed a "no brainer" and yet it has been a strangely uphill fight. The visual image I mentioned was a poster in a regional office of an American environmental organization, the Sierra Club. The poster demonstrates the way even the best intentioned effort can subvert its own agendas if it is using the wrong tools of thought. It is a photograph of a lone fly-fisherman in a stream, his line in mid-air and mid-cast, and in the distant background some gorgeous mountain scenery. Not another soul in sight. It is a lovely photo. However it conveys all the wrong messages so far as environmental preservation is concerned. For one thing, the guy is completely and absolutely alone. Nobody can work for the environment alone; it's a collective effort if it is anything, and nothing in the image speaks a syllable about collective effort or collective value. It is just Him and Nature. Then there is the treatment of nature in the photo: a vast natural wilderness is arranged as a kind of support system for the solitary sportsman. Nature in effect commodified. Nature is something that you, too, can "have" if you join the Sierra Club. Instead of reflecting the complex web of relationships that constitutes both the natural world and also the collective effort to preserve it, the image pitches to the short-term possessive imagination of who knows what viewer, the very one who probably would not have much time for the Sierra Club. In short, and probably thanks to some advertising advisor, the image says exactly the wrong things about what is involved for an organization supposedly geared to protect and preserve the environment. This kind of problem – the failure to consider what Hayden White calls "the content of the form" – is endemic in educational systems and elsewhere and persists as long as it remains implicit. The way to make it explicit, this book argues, is to recognize and focus on systemic value. Those trained to use modern tools – and that is most of us – are not particularly good at that.

The book has two parts. The first outlines a problematic and defines the basic contrast between the Modern Condition (Chapter 1) and the challenges to it that authorize my phrase "the Discursive Condition" (Chapter 2). As indicated above these overlapping cultural systems are yet fundamentally incompatible in key ways. The term "condition" follows Lyotard's precedent

in *The Postmodern Condition* of treating cultural conditions as the functional equivalent of the “natural” – conditions measured by empiricists. The second part of the book contains four chapters that address some practical issues presented by the Discursive Condition thus defined. Chapter 3 re-defines individual identity and agency as something different from the founding subject of history. Chapter 4 attends to the re-definition of time, a term often invoked but rarely defined as a property or condition of historical explanation. Chapter 5 considers the implications of temporal re-definition for historical explanation as that convention is used by everyone, not just professional historians. Chapter 6 considers the new possibilities for creative and collective action opened up by new constructions of identity, agency and temporality.

The problem of history is addressed in the first chapter and, while history is not the only issue, it is arguably *the issue* because its methods have become our tools of thought to such an extent that historical explanation has the most immediate and profound implications for everyone, academic or not. Historical methods and assumptions govern to a significant degree the now common-sense definitions of identity, causality, time and sequence. Andrew Bacevich has recently shown how historical conventions can be used to suppress what might otherwise qualify as history, for example how “history as a succession of presidential administrations” has become a commanding system of meaning and value, not unlike a language, which is increasingly irrelevant and which nevertheless has overtaken other possible stories and become, in that much reduced form, a history that shuts out all stories but one (Bacevich, p. 30). Interesting as this is, Bacevich’s most interesting example is himself, and what he says about the way he was educated (West Point) and the degree to which his education worked as a kind of propaganda (not his word) that fostered the interests of elites (*ibid.*, p. 116 and *passim*).

Throughout the discussion art has a presence, recognized not as something ornamental and marginal to corporate life but as its chief engine of change. An artist pushes the envelope in ways that open a new possibility. For that reason films or paintings or narratives make regular appearances and are integral, not marginal, to the argument. Creative experimentation with the nature of the sequence can be found in highly achieved forms in the work of creative people where new tools of thought may first become accessible. Another constant agenda is to unpack the complexity and near-miraculousness of even the most ordinary uses of semiological systems as defined by Saussure and as discussed in Chapter 2; if you think you have “done” Saussure, look again.

Part I

The discursive challenge

1 The Modern Condition

At the turn of the twenty-first century Eurocentric culture faces a situation like the one that faced Quattrocento Italy 600 years earlier: a situation in which various tectonic shifts have changed the foundations of culture and disturbed common sense in ways that will take centuries fully to unfold. Today, as in the fifteenth century, we cannot map in clear outlines the differences between one cultural formation and another because that can only come with hindsight. These complexities await the simplification provided by historical recollection. But we can mark changes in degree that become changes in kind, that disturb equilibrium states in multiple ways that have no predictable consequences, that bear on each other in cascading effects, and that resist rationalization.

The Renaissance was a “rebirth” of classical texts, but it was also a new birth, the birth of the Modern Condition: a cultural order that from its first surprising moments to its most commanding late expressions took centuries to unfold across the range of practice: in sciences, in arts, in politics, in philosophy, in technology. The culturally unique values that characterize the Modern Condition have become so thoroughly naturalized that even those who recognize the new outlines of a “post” modern formation still rely on modern tools of thought as a kind of automatic pilot to guide practical conduct and choices. That includes the present author; I do not claim to be handing over a new toolkit, or to be making evaluative distinctions in favor of one or the other term in the comparison between the Modern Condition and the Discursive Condition. I claim only to describe a foundational difference between the long, productive culture of modernity and the new, perhaps potentially equally productive culture that is challenging the methods and assumptions of modernity, not only in philosophical terms but on the ground, in practical ways. My very modern method involves noticing cognate developments in different fields of practice whose similarities suggest that they share a common basis. Neither the subject nor my vocabulary is abstruse. The concepts are counter-intuitive but accessible and not restricted to specialized interests, on the contrary. The tools of thought inherited from modernity are increasingly at odds with our personal and practical situations and thus indicate a growing and even urgent need for consideration and re-consideration of what the changes demonstrated imply for long-familiar assumptions about identity, time, causality, creativity and politics.

4 *The discursive challenge*

To call the new situation “postmodernity,” as I have done in previous work, marks the fact of a significant departure but marks it in terms of a chronological and an essentially negative definition (postmodern is merely “after” modernity) and does not define either the known situation or the new one that succeeds it. Not surprisingly, therefore, many such terminological problems litter the field of engagement over the “postmodern.” The term itself has been used to mean entirely different things to different people or interest groups and has thus become a term that is more of a hindrance to discovery than a help. The alternative phrase, Discursive Condition, features the important role of language in the foundational changes involved and discussed in subsequent chapters. The term “language” itself indicates widely differing conceptions. Interpreters often seem to use the term ‘language’ mainly to indicate “words” or at best grammatical actions such as “predication” or rule-based language “games.” Ian Hacking’s book, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?* (1975) begins by announcing that he will only consider Anglo-American sources on language (e.g., Hobbes, Bertrand Russell, Chomsky, Donald Davies, Wittgenstein, and similar), all of which is a little like saying I will discuss evolution using only Mr. Wallace’s essay. French sources are dismissed as being useful only to “top up” the argument (p.10), as if to suggest they are on the same page as Wittgenstein *et al.* Saussure is not even mentioned. To other interpreters “language” indicates systemic values of the kind outlined by the lectures of Ferdinand de Saussure who defined language as a *differential* system of meaning and value that includes but is not limited to verbal language and can include traffic systems, fashion systems, political systems, ritual systems and so on. This approach may seem quite familiar to many academic readers, but in this book I ask them to think again about the implications of these familiar terms. How “language” functions in practical terms is essential to the process of recalibration that is now so urgently needed, and learning how language works involves more than merely assimilating new content in old structures of understanding, especially when, as Hayden White says, and for the reasons discussed below in this chapter, we have repressed “the *conceptual apparatus* (without which atomic facts cannot be aggregated . . .)” (1978, p. 126). For some, especially those who already think they understand the so-called “linguistic turn,” the necessary first step in understanding the practical implications of discursive regimens, or languages, or what Saussure called semiological systems, may be to rethink how Saussure has been used, and to reconsider what exactly “language” means not just for specialists but for the practical affairs that concern us all.

Whatever we call it, however, a paradigmatic shift has manifested itself in too many ways to be ignored or dismissed. Denial is not a viable option; it wastes time and it forecloses prematurely on the opportunity to reconsider and renew familiar institutions and practices in terms of their new and actual conditions. Does the Discursive Condition amount to a mortal challenge to representation in art and politics, to the foundations of empirical science and historical explanation, to capitalism? If so, then at the very least it would be

essential to understand the new conditions in the fullest and most generous way, even if only for the sake of preserving and renewing long-standing commitments and perhaps even in order to create new ones. An adequate historical framework would put into context the persistent and sometimes silly claims about the relation (or lack of relation) between modernity (or postmodernity) and capitalism. The cultural values this book claims are in question appeared centuries before any cognate economic development whether mere trade or fully fledged corporate capitalism, and no one, least of all the avatars of postmodernity and late-capitalism, has yet done the work that would show capitalism to be an inevitable outcome of the foundational systems of modernity described here. However those foundations do support our continuing reliance on tools of thought that are now centuries old. Our epistemic commitments hamper the attempt to formulate the problem. "It is not easy to say something new; it is not enough for us to open our eyes, to pay attention, to be aware" (Foucault, 1972, p. 45).

Epistemic arrangements also govern the academic disciplines (knowledge silos) in ways that make it difficult or impossible for academics to approach these foundational issues through a single discipline. Yet universities' commitment to "interdisciplinary" education remains largely lip service because to foster truly cross-disciplinary work would cost money, so what we have instead are, largely, splicing mechanisms. However, the fact is that in the centuries since the Quattrocento, Western modernity has developed through many overlapping systems, progressions, and digressions. They would be difficult to trace in any terms, and impossible to trace in the exclusively disciplinary terms that continue to define higher education in North America and largely in the English-speaking world. At the same time, there exist across the range of practice certain regularities, persistences, habitual formations that can be said to characterize modernity as a cultural formation distinct from those of the Middle Ages, or classical times, or our own times. And the more those modern formations are challenged by the science, art, and politics of our time, the more evident become their key characteristics and values.

This chapter focuses on a key value – I would even argue that it is *the* key value – of the Modern Condition: the value of neutrality. The invention of neutrality was a complex, extensively expressed cultural event that has been at the foundation of the rationalization of Western faculties and the consequent objectification of the world that has governed six centuries of Eurocentric culture. The invention of neutrality in the Quattrocento made possible, for the first time ever in any culture, an objectification of the world that has been a staple of modernity for centuries and regardless of field or form or practice. The following three paragraphs summarize briefly my subsequent argument in this chapter.

Classical and medieval cosmologies were conceived as configured by divine influences, whereas the cosmology of modernity has neutralized time and space and turned them into universal common denominators. With such neutral

media at the basis of measurement, modernity has transformed the world, beginning with the capacity, now so common-sensical and “natural” to us, to make mutually informative measurements between cases widely separated in time or space. In the Middle Ages, differences between things are absolute which is why medieval cosmology registers a correspondingly detailed and complex cosmos which has no universal common denominators but instead is configured by divine influence in every detail. In modernity differences are not absolute but relative depending on points of view that can be mutually informative because they exist “in” a common time or space which these points of view generate and “in” which their differences, to use the words of one treatise, are “concordable” because they can be mutually aligned “in” the neutral common denominator media of time and space (Ivins, 1938, 4th from the last page of Viator Segundo, *De artificiali perspectiva* 1509 [pages unnumbered]). This modern condition of measurement is foundational to empiricism and historicism and to representation both as pictorial realism and also as politics. The perspective systems reflecting these space intuitions are nothing less than a new technology, one that appeared first in visual art in the Italian Renaissance (from roughly 1400) and eventually in temporal forms (from the 1700s). The excitement created by these new technologies is everywhere evident in the visual art of the Quattrocento and over several centuries their application spread to cartography and exploration and across the range of practice as one field after another pursued the implications of this new technology and the ideas it developed.

When we talk about the Discursive Condition we are talking primarily about the loss of this neutrality and thus, implicitly and even potentially, the loss of everything it has made possible. Are these changes merely a matter of internal combustion within academia? Or are they a widely disseminated fact? If, as I believe, the latter is the case, then at the very least it constitutes a wake-up call. If we are in the process of forging new foundations for common sense, then what are they? What system or systems are we engaged with and what are their powers and limitations? These are the questions that interest me, and in order to ask them intelligently, it is necessary to compare systems and to work in the in-between of disciplinary materials from philosophy, history, literature, visual arts, mathematics, and science. It is also necessary, as Foucault demonstrated by example, to work within a much wider historical horizon than is usual in most academic disciplines even, or perhaps especially, in humanities.

The present chapter is about the origins and epistemic function of neutrality: a common denominator principle that I argue is fundamental to modernity and to understanding its tools of thought. My discussion focuses on the heart of this complex issue: the construction of neutral time and space, arguably the two most powerful forms of this achievement. Without understanding this invention of neutrality it does not seem to me possible to understand much about the recent disturbances of the cultural field in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The discontinuous medieval ground

For many, even the willing, the most difficult step in approaching such large comparisons as those between medieval and modern, or between modern and discursive, is the step involved in grasping the idea that our conceptions of time and space are historically limited: that they are constructions of a particular phase of Eurocentric culture and not natural conditions. Counterintuitive as this may seem, it remains the case that neutral space was invented in the Renaissance, in early modernity, through the development of a particular perspective apparatus that is nothing less than a new technology. The temporal analogue of neutral space is the neutral time that most westerners now take for granted, largely thanks to the nineteenth century. Before 1300 such ideas of time and space were essentially unknown in any broadly disseminated way. They simply were not part of Europe's medieval or classical heritages. The unities of field and of identity that centuries of empiricism have taught us to take for granted have no significant role in medieval historiography, or mathematics, or art. In the Middle Ages time and space were conceived as discontinuous. A medieval historian treated time as one single field of influences that was without significant chronological organization (Spiegel, p. 322). The unity of the group in flow or the meaningful distinction of past, present, and future, are things we assume as heirs of modernity but they were not familiar to the medieval historian. In his static and discontinuous universe, the medieval historian or, more exactly, author of narrative could draw interpretive generalizations from typological paradigms. The successful French king was one who approximated the type represented by Charlemagne, however remote from any particular French king Charlemagne's immediate concerns might have been. The unifying principles of history were typological patterns that repeated themselves, and interpretation of everything, even the most trivial event, could only happen in terms of some such typological figuration.

Such typologies are typical in most cultural traditions on the planet, including European tradition up until the early modern era. It is the modern construction of time and space, that is relatively unique. Saint Augustine's reflections on time and memory show that, like the heirs of modernity, he understood the link between temporality and mental impressions (*Confessions*, XI, xxvii, pp. 283, 271). But Augustine did not elevate those impressions to the status we give them. He regarded time and memory as paltry, perishable things. "We can affirm that time is only in that it tends towards not-being," he says, in a sentence that makes one long to hear the conversation in heaven between him and Heidegger (*ibid.*, XI, xiv, p. 271). But while he perceives that intimacy between time and consciousness, later so important in modernity, he does not consider it to have positive value. "Thus it seems to me that time is certainly extendedness – but I do not know what it is extendedness of: probably of the mind itself" (*ibid.*, XI, xxvi, p. 281). Given a positive value, the link between consciousness and time underwrites historical explanation and the invention of its founding subject; given a negative value, as Augustine does, any study of time and

consciousness is a study of human limitation, contingency, dependency, incompleteness, imperfection, in short a study of all the reasons why human experience prompts the mind to seek completeness through the superhuman Creator (see Jordan, p. 257). Earthly discontinuity and incompleteness exist, so his argument goes, in order to lead the mind to God.

This discontinuity in the conditions of perception appears everywhere in medieval and early modern art and is essential to typological thinking and to the construction of time that characterizes medieval art and narrative. The great exemplar of typological thinking is Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. As the Knight of the Sad Countenance he strives to live up to some type of the knight errant such as Amadis of Gaul, who has little to do with Quixote's immediate circumstances. This disjunction is the basis of an endless series of jokes at his expense as he strives nobly to uphold a habit of mind that has faded from priority. Likewise in visual art the tripartite backgrounds of medieval icons mark a similar discontinuity between fields (Figure 1.1, p. 13). Making few concessions to spectator awareness, such visual images give (in the words of one commentator) "no countenance to the idea that is the essence and foundation of converging European perspective – the idea that we are more distant from one part than from another." We get a minimum of optical form and a maximum of essential qualities. "A square thing is square, a round thing is round; no further concession is made to the spectator." This describes medieval painting at least as well as it describes the early Chinese painting that actually sponsors this description (Wells, pp. 18–21).

The conditions being compared here are mutually exclusive. In conditions characterized by foundational discontinuity the effort called for was to save the appearances, in other words, make a place in the complex edifice of theology for everything in Creation as it is. The medieval habit Huizinga describes – the habit "of accentuating every detail, of developing every thought and every image to the end, of giving concrete form to every concept of the mind," belonged to a general habit of mind more intent upon the congruences sought with medieval tools of thought than upon the continuities sought with modern tools of thought (Huizinga, pp. 255–256). Detail has considerably more importance for measuring congruences than it has in modern conditions where details function as disposable stepping stones to the generalizations that modernity seeks, and where the agenda is more about saving the essences, not the appearances (Ermarth, 1998, pp. 16–24). These traditions are traceable to the ancients where even physical science considered spaces as objects in themselves, each ending at the edge of a neighboring object. Similarly in medieval narrative, the interlaced structures of the *Morte d'Arthur* or the *Song of Roland* contain richness and multiplicity in discrete episodes of action uncoordinated by systematic temporal relationship. Such narratives baffle modern readers who assume that a narrative is a temporal sequence and do not recognize other kinds of sequence, such as rhetorical ones. Eugene Vinaver makes a similar point about the baffling way that the *Song of Roland* "triumphantly" discards the "twin principles of rational and

temporal motivation" (Vinaver, p. 10). Even where time has thematic value it has ritual rather than formal importance. Like Cervantes, other accomplished early modern writers such as Chaucer (in *The Canterbury Tales*) or Thomas More (in *Utopia*) play off the differences and incompatibilities between the two orders of things.

The tools of thought that produced discontinuous time and space cannot support modern conceptions of personality. The medieval writer, in Gabrielle Spiegel's terms, treated personality as "a collection of attributes with more or less independent status." So

when Henry Suso renders homage to a beggar woman because she is a type of the Virgin, he is making a typological identification, not a similitude, and he does this by selecting one attribute of the beggar and one of the Virgin. Only that attribute is explained by the typological reference. The fact that the woman is a beggar may have some other typological reading but it is irrelevant to the typological identification of her and the Virgin which is made on the basis of their sex alone and is absolute. He considers her womanliness quite apart from her beggarliness and does not force on the beggar woman a demand for consistency that would have to be purchased by reduction.

(Spiegel, pp. 319–321)

These are not conditions that can support the existence of that quintessence, the modern idea of personality, Foucault's "founding subject of history."

A similar discontinuousness appears in medieval visual art because of its lack of interest in spectator awareness. Any implied spectator has a fractured existence, somewhat like the personality described by Huizinga: "there is no point of view at which the spectator is supposed to stand," and so the viewer must be imagined as stationed in front of whatever surface is presented, i.e., simultaneously in several different places (Huizinga, pp. 255–256). The prevailing medieval tendency was "to isolate each thing as a special entity" with its own special relation to "the eternal verities" (ibid., p. 212; Edgerton, p. 159).

Medieval art including its historiography thus reflects intuitions about identity and relationship that Europe inherited from the Greeks practically unmodified and that had received their mathematical statement in Euclidean geometry (the versions before modern modifications). These intuitions, according to William Ivins Jr.'s early, seminal books on Renaissance perspective, have the powers and limitations of their origins in tactile-muscular intuitions rather than in visual ones. So, for example, parallel lines converge to sight but not to touch. The fact that the Greeks had almost no descriptive theorems is testimony to their independence of visual intuitions (Ivins, 1946). Where modern geometry would develop one proof for a series of different but similar figures – conic sections for example – Greek geometry would develop a different proof for each discrete figure. In Cassirer's description, differences in the appearances of figures were considered unmediateable:

Every difference in the arrangement of the given and sought lines of a problem presents a new problem in regard to the proof; to every difference in the total appearance of a figure corresponds a difference in interpretation and deduction. A problem which modern synthetic geometry solves by a single construction, was analysed by Apollonius into more than eighty cases, differing only in position. The unity of the constructive principles of geometry is hidden by the specialization of its particular forms, of which each one is conceived as irreducible.

(Cassirer p. 70; quoted in Ivins, 1946, p. 101)

Where the modern geometer thinks of discrete forms mainly in terms of their mutual relationships, the early Euclidean geometers, with their watertight categories and discontinuities, conceived a world in which differences in the appearances of forms were absolute. This mathematical symbolization of Greek space intuitions reflects the view of a static, discontinuous universe that remained essentially unmodified until the Renaissance.

None of this implies that Greek or medieval cultures had no idea of unity. On the contrary, it was because they assumed a universe unified by divine influence that they could make distinctions with such nicety. Homer's *The Iliad* describes a universe ruled by *moira*, destiny, the way things are, such that all destinies, at least all destinies that matter, are predetermined in detail and cannot be changed, not even by the gods. Achilles, Hektor, Diomedes, Ajax each had their separate thread spun by the Erynes who governed destiny. The great battle scenes present one hero fighting, then the opponent fighting and falling; we do not see the fight between them. That relationship – “the unity of the group in flow” which has become “the essential aspect of the world for modern eyes” – is a relationship “to which the Greeks were blind” (Ivins, 1946, p. 15). The most to hope for, and for the Greek hero it was everything, was the opportunity to achieve *areté*: the fullest possible momentary expression of their whole being. Similarly the scholastic method met irreconcilable differences by making another distinction, permitting it by making room for it with a new category. Discussion of medieval perceptual modes can be found in classic texts by C.S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, and William Brandt. The proper goal of any generalization was to save the appearances, to accommodate all particulars, with ever-new categories if need be. Modernity reversed the process; it has sought to subsume different particulars at a higher level of generalization, into more general, more abstract categories, in its long effort to “save the essences” (Ermarth, 1998, pp. 16–24).

Before leaving this initial discussion of spatial invention, and even though I am not a mathematician, I will take a moment to discuss, with the help of experts, some of the mathematical considerations that generalize the pictorial metaphor I have been primarily using. The full mathematical statement of these space intuitions did not appear until the 1630s when the French mathematician Gérard Desargues produced the modified version of Euclidean

geometry in which he developed proofs for the relationships between figures rather than for discrete figures themselves (Ivins, 1938, p. 12). With a cone sliced in sections the medieval geometers developed a different proof for every different conic; Desargues saw "the descriptive qualities that ran invariantly through the whole series of conics" (ibid., p. 92) and allowed description of the individual slices in terms of a single figure. Individual forms then become merely cases of the more abstract forms perceptive in the invariances that ran through any series. Thus Desargues could develop a mathematical proof that the arc of the widest circle is a straight line, something that would have made no sense to the ancients. To antiquity, Alfred N. Whitehead noted,

mathematics was the science of a static universe. Any transition was conceived of as a transition of static forms. Today we conceive of forms of transition. The modern concept of an infinite series is the concept of a form of transition, namely, the character of the series of the whole is such a form.

(Quoted in Ivins, 1946, p. 101)

Forms of transition, forms of the whole, can become the preoccupation of modern science precisely because the medium of measurement has been neutralized. For the modern mathematician there are "no longer unbridgeable gaps between the different kinds of lines" (Whitehead, p. 112; quoted in Ivins, 1946, p. 101). Discrete forms, whether in realist art or in mathematical theory are but symbols of an abstract system and, as such, they can only be understood in terms of their relationships within that system.

The various sensuously possible cases of a figure are not, as in Greek geometry, individually conceived and investigated, but all interest is concentrated on the manner in which they mutually proceed from each other. In so far as an individual form is considered, it never stands for itself alone but as a symbol of the system to which it belongs and as an expression for the totality of forms into which it can be transformed under certain rules of transformation

(Cassirer, p. 112).

Any figure is a sign that points beyond itself; it is not apprehensible in itself, but only as a symbol of a systemic reality hidden in the series of apparent forms and coordinating them invisibly.

Neutralizing space and time

The Renaissance marks a major shift in human consciousness about the description of nature and about experience in the physical world. The most familiar evidence of this shift appears in the work of visual artists and architects such as Michelangelo, Brunelleschi, Raphael, and the many less familiar

painters of this time: artists who for the first time explored thoroughly the powers and possibilities of a new set of mental tools that made it possible to objectify the world. They represent a revolution in consciousness that, whatever its causes and however slowly expressed across its potential range, indicates a tectonic cultural shift that introduced two premises fundamental ever since in Western culture and Western science. The two premises are these: that nature is uniform; and that space and time are neutral, homogeneous, and infinite.

In the discontinuous universe of medieval art previously described one could not generalize from a series of cases because, as the result of divine, not human, agency, the differences between them were considered absolute and inviolable. Consequently it was impossible to arrive at a modern perception of objects as things having internal invariances that constitute their identity. Instead, each change in position presented a new problem of explanation because conditions were discrete and in no way the same in one time or place as in another. There was no universally reliable common denominator for human use, only an all-powerful divinity whose arrangements were beyond question or meddling.

However when time and space are constructed as neutral, homogeneous, and infinite – and creating this, nothing less, is what realist visual art achieved – then it becomes possible to make the kind of mutually informative measurements that enable us to “identify” the essential object as it exists ostensibly independent of measurement. This process literally objectifies the world, and managing it was essential to the successful development of modern science compared with the relative failure of medieval science which lacked these key principles (see Ivins, 1938, p. 9).

Essential to that capacity was the faith – and it is no more and no less than an act of faith – that time and space are not configured by divine influence but are neutral and infinite. Renaissance realism literally creates and makes evident this space. The beauty of the details in Raphael or Pinturicchio are nevertheless only the secondary carriers of this primary and most powerful generalization about the nature of the world and about the conditions of measurement. What the realist perspective convention did was to produce a formal condition in which all possible viewpoints agree, or more accurately, do not disagree. This constituted a “rationalization of sight” that was, as William M. Ivins Jr. characterizes it, “the most important event of the Renaissance” (ibid., p. 13). That formal agreement or, more accurately, that lack of disagreement is what I call the “consensus” of realism. It differs completely from the effort called for by, say, Kafka or Cortázar, Tarantino, or Kieslowski.

This step of rationalizing sight is important enough to consider more closely because it informs centuries of subsequent achievement. Consider what I call a “perspective technology.” The Renaissance painter, using laws discovered by experiment and codified by Leone Battista Alberti (*Della Pittura*, 1436), was to project onto the picture plane not one but two intersecting visual cones in order to achieve universal consistency within a single system of measurement. That “agreement” which is really the lack of disagreement made possible a

universality maintained at a certain level of abstraction, or law, where what applies here (in largely quantitative terms) applies everywhere “in” space. The “life like” images that this perspective technology made possible as a technique was in fact a highly abstract achievement pretending not to be.

Here readers might recall their drawing class in school where they experimented with just this perspective technology in order to (triumphantly) represent accurately a three-dimensional cube. A single, frontal visual cone (Figure 1.2) provides no guide to the systemic relationships. But two intersecting cones, and the grid they make possible (Figure 1.3), do precisely that. In so doing they unify the field and neutralize the medium by submitting everything to a single system of measurement that applies universally. The realism of art is a consensus apparatus because its intersecting visual cones “agree” in the sense that they do not disagree as they often do in medieval art (Figure 1.1). The agreement that is lack of disagreement, what I call the “consensus” of viewpoints, maintains the principle of non-contradiction so deeply embedded in Western metaphysics. This realist consensus is in some ways a profoundly self-reflexive device, because it calls attention to the act of rationalization itself rather than to the secondary details that are the carriers of that more powerful act. The formal agreement literally creates the neutral space that makes objectivity possible. Any viewpoint that does not “agree” in the sense that it does not belong to the general non-contradictory system of relations – for example those Renaissance paintings where there are two or more vanishing points, or in an Escher print – literally warps

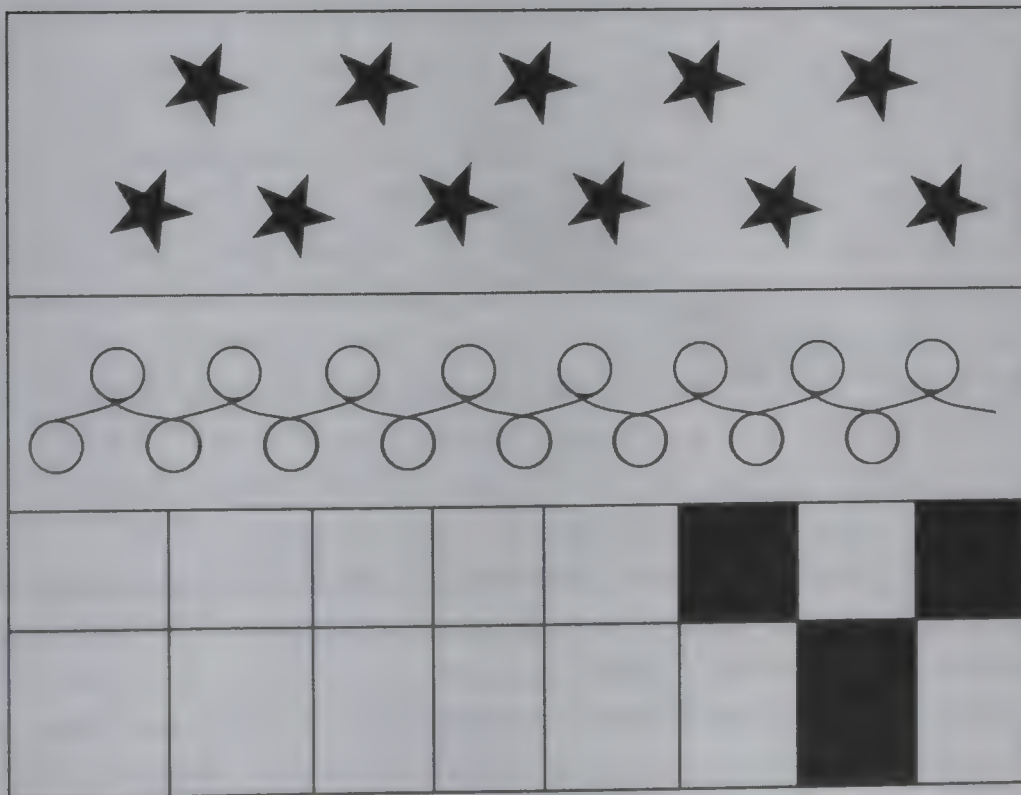
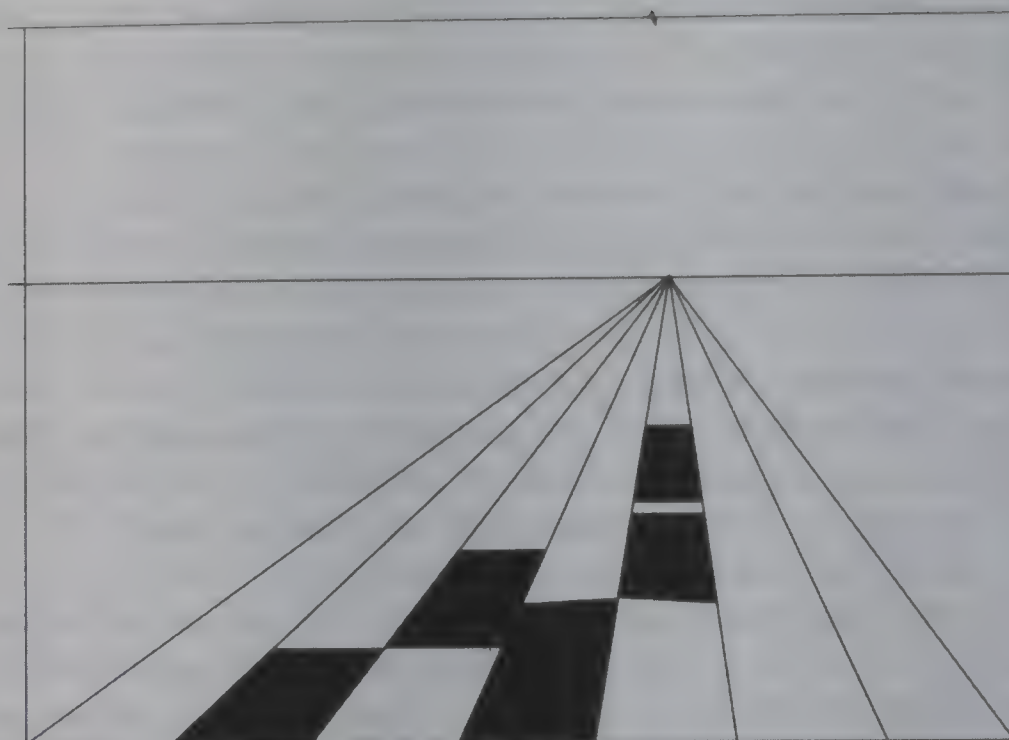
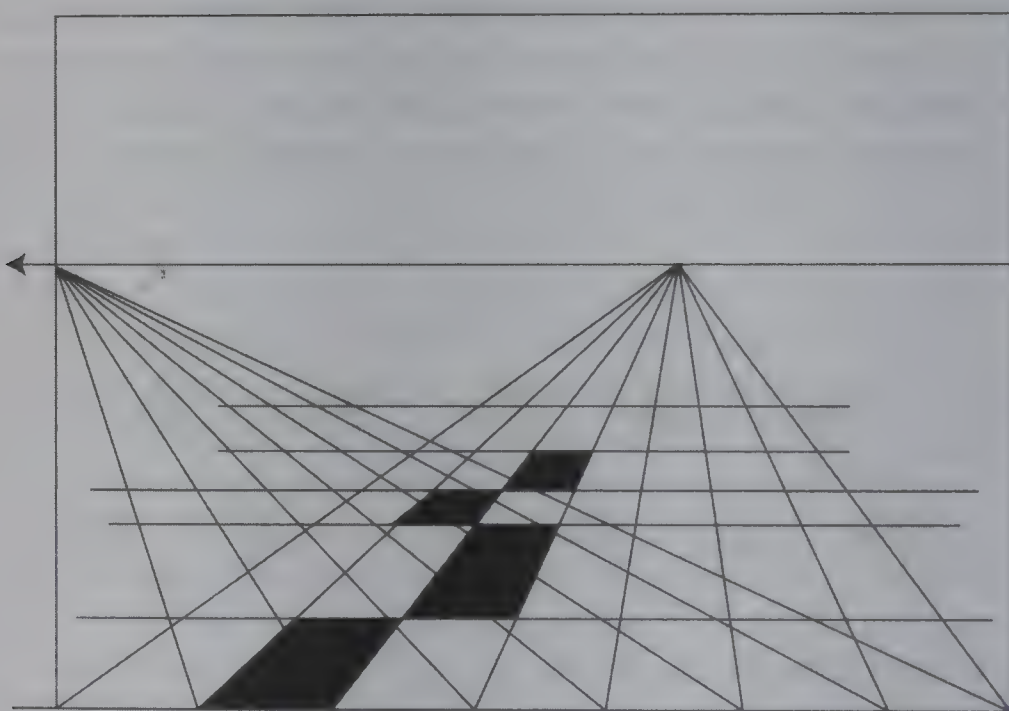


Figure 1.1

*Figure 1.2**Figure 1.3*

space, disturbing or destroying its neutrality. Although the representational convention claims to be “mere” recording it is far more than that; it marks a fundamental change in the tools of thought.

Under ideal circumstances I could introduce here some color plates showing various Renaissance paintings which exploit in varying degrees the grammar of single-point perspective: Giovanni di Paolo’s *St. John the Baptist Retiring to the Desert*, Raphael’s *The School at Athens* in the Vatican, Leonardo’s *Last*

Supper on the refectory wall of Santa Maria della Grazie in Milan, or one of the many church interiors by Pieter Saenredam such as the *Buukerk at Utrecht*. All of them would help to demonstrate the ways in which, from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, this particular grammar of perspective produces a common medium extending to infinity and containing all the world without boundary or contradiction.

The objectivity established by this consensus is formal and claims universal applicability simply by its intolerance of foundational difference. In the realist convention, alterity simply does not exist in the sense that would derange the founding methodological (i.e., formal) rationalization. Dis-agreement at the level of method would invalidate the entire system, so no dis-agreement can be tolerated. This is what Lyotard refers to when he says that consensus is a "terrorist apparatus"; by definition it cannot tolerate foundational difference (1984, pp. 63–65).

The formal consensus of Quattrocento realism thus establishes that "the same" conditions hold everywhere in space as it is constituted by the perspective system. In the perspective system where all viewpoints agree, in the sense that they do not disagree, the invariance of objects can be discovered precisely because it has become possible to compare different views on what, by means of that very activity, is constituted as the object. Objects appear to have an invariant structure because, by convention, a change of position or vantage point does not change its identity which is something that is not apparent on the surface but that instead inheres in the internal "depth" of the object. Thus the realist artist can project from a limited number of cases to general laws of relationship or sequence. The cartographer and explorer can project relationships all over the globe, even in places where they have never been, and can thus sail West in the faith that this will not mean sailing off the edge of the world. Implicit in the very idea of horizon, for example, is the faith that the abstract and fundamental laws of operation are universal and govern what cannot be seen much like they govern what can be seen. The vanishing point and infinity in the perspective grammar are, by convention, arbitrary limitations on a system of relationships that is consistent, predictable at a certain level of abstraction, and universally extendable and valid.

The projective methods of the painters owed much to the Ptolemaic method for projecting the globe, recently revived in fifteenth-century Europe, which make it possible to reduce "the traditional heterogeneity of the world's surface to a complete geometrical uniformity." By using a grid system of invariant relationships, the cartographer, like the realist painter, conceptualized space and therefore could project from the charted relationships of the known world by extension to the uncharted world (Edgerton, pp. 113, 122). The method implies a certain confidence in the rationality of the world *perceived at a certain level of abstraction*. No matter what particular situations may be revealed over the horizon, the basic grid is agreed upon, and so a whole world can be projected in which there will be no absolute discontinuities, no disturbing anomalies that cannot be rationalized at this level of generalization.

This may be a starting point from which to account for the cluelessness of international corporate entities such as British Petroleum and Goldman Sachs.

This convention literally objectifies the world by constructing a neutral medium of space that acts as a universal common denominator. The objects that materialize “in” this medium act mainly to specify and carry the generalization about the oneness of the world maintained by the perspective grammar. What single-point perspective systems primarily represent, then, is not at all accurate visions of the Vatican or the Virgin but, instead, the existence of neutral space. They produce neutral space. It is their most important achievement.

Here is an example of how the new perspective technology objectifies the world. Take one famous painting, Raphael’s fresco in the Vatican, *The School at Athens*. The blocks of the parquet floor, like so many parquet floors to come in the history of European realism, are square as they might be in a medieval or Chinese painting. But the actual form of these “squares” in the fresco is trapezoid. There is no assertion made, as would be the case in a medieval icon, that they *are* trapezoid, only that they seem so from a certain visual angle. Even though the visual form presented is trapezoid, viewers clearly apprehend the squareness of the parquet sections *because they understand the abstract system that governs particulars*. They understand that the actual invariant identity of something emerges from the series of vantage points implicit in the painting. What looks one way from here looks different from there: embedded in this recognition is the assumption of internal and invariant (“object-ive”) identity. In other words, the squareness of the sections, which is their identity, can only be gathered from a series of implied viewpoints and can be fully grasped only as an abstraction from immediate experience. Where in prior geometry or physics each appearance would have a separate explanation, here each appearance confirms the general system that makes it possible to see one and “the same” world existing in the series of aspects, just as one can see the overall cone in a series of conic sections. What remains constant or similar in the accumulated series points to identity.

This convention has profound implications that took centuries to explore. For example, it establishes the principle that sequence is productive, and it establishes an ethic of mobility because in order to know anything you have to move from one perspective to another and another in order to grasp the “objective” reality. The productiveness of sequence and the ethic of mobility constitute key principles of modernity and were explored for the first time in Renaissance and Reformation Europe. The “point of view” codified by the realist painters as they empowered spectator awareness in spatial and visual terms, much later became Foucault’s founding subject of history when the perspective apparatus moved from space and sight to time and consciousness.

This perspective technology confers a new role on details, decreasing their importance. Formerly understood as essential features of a divinely ordered cosmos, discrete details now come to be understood as partial expressions of hidden invariances, or identities, which are independent of any particular form

of visual apprehension in space or, as eventually becomes evident in the novel centuries later, independent of any particular moment or consciousness. The invariant identity of anything cannot be discovered at once but only eventually through a series of comparisons where essential properties can be distinguished from secondary ones. So in visual realism discrete forms are replaced by continuities, stasis is replaced by implied motion, and hierarchy is replaced by horizon. The *veritas* of medieval art is succeeded by the verisimilitude of realism. By comparison it is a relatively small step from this to the descriptive sciences that developed along with the influence of empiricist philosophy. After the seminal two centuries of early modernity, it would be a long time until artists, philosophers, even scientists would be able to liberate details from the rationalizing powers.

In sum, the perspective technology thus produced a common (neutral) spatial horizon for all potential perspectives. That is its chief accomplishment. The common horizon – where everything “is” in “the same” space – is not a means to the end of producing verisimilitude, it is an end in itself, an enabling fiction with immense powers of generalization. Compared with the space of medieval painting – which was either a frankly virtual space for icons or a quasi-representational space fractured by competing vanishing points – the space of Masaccio, Piero della Francesca, and a large company of Renaissance architects and painters, was a homogenized, neutral medium in which mutually informative measurements could be made and in which the logic of spectator awareness was absolute. The agreement of all possible perspectives in such painting literally creates space, that is, a homogeneous, neutral medium. From any viewpoint available in the common horizon – either the one arbitrarily assigned by an artist to viewers or any others potentially available in the representational space – a spectator could grasp an invariant logic of relationships (a world) that remained the same regardless of spectator position and that extended to infinity and thus had the value of universal truth. This convention reigned in Western European painting from the Renaissance through the nineteenth century at least and is still with us alongside other manifestations of the same systemic perceptions. The technical achievement in painting belongs to the same cultural shift that is associated with the rediscovery of classical models in the Renaissance: a shift that changed the entire method of understanding and produced new tools of thought. The invention of neutrality, and its corresponding “objectivity,” however, was not a classical inheritance; it was Renaissance Europe’s creation alone.

The immense possibilities of the neutrality established by the perspective system, and of the common horizon it sustains, became brilliantly evident not only in Renaissance painting and architecture, in cartography and exploration, but also in many subsequent cultural specifications discussed elsewhere (Ermarth, 1998, Ch. 2). The metaphor of consensus in which all viewpoints converge on “the same” world appear variously in the neoclassical architecture now familiar in provincial and national capitols, in the layout of theaters and performance spaces, in the development of projective and non-Euclidean

geometry, and in new forms of politics. Across a wide range of material expression, and perhaps for the first time ever in any culture, this perspective system produced and disseminated the value of neutrality.

What the Renaissance initiated subsequent centuries explored. Of course there were resistances, for example the resistance to Copernicus or to Darwin. But by the seventeenth century the tools of thought had changed fundamentally, so that where medieval discontinuity once was, modern neutralities now were. Only then could modern science and its technologies develop. From the painting of Leonardo to the projections of Desargues the main event is now the production (and representation) of conditions in which objectification becomes possible. The objects so realistically rendered are only the carriers of an abstract and powerful system that invites comparison among particulars, that renders them mutually informative, and that provides an infinite horizon. Detail is a clue or a carrier, disposable once it yields its abstraction through comparative measurement among many details. The sought “square” of the painted parquet floor remains at a certain abstracted remove from the trapezoidal details that are given.

An especially paradoxical feature of the perspective grammar is that it masks the abstraction upon which it depends. For example, the perspective grammar in visual art – and by extension all the devices of empirical description – seeks to appear “natural” and to erase the evidence of its constructedness. We are asked to admire a verisimilitude that pretends to be a “mere” reproduction of spectator awareness. It may be difficult for us to recover the *éclat* of that particular gesture for a world in which few artists anywhere had ever made such systematic concessions to spectator awareness. It may even have been the case that, practically speaking, there was no such spectator awareness to appeal to in the first place, given that the tools of thought essential to that perception were only being forged.

In appreciating these complexities even sophisticated viewers can go badly wrong, as Roland Barthes does in this denunciation of the Dutch painter, Pieter Saenredam:

Saenredam painted neither faces nor objects, but chiefly vacant church interiors, reduced to the beige and innocuous unction of butterscotch ice cream. These churches, where there is nothing to be seen but expanses of wood and whitewashed plaster, are irremediably unpeopled, and this negation goes much further than the destruction of idols. Never has nothingness been so confident . . . He articulates by antithesis the nature of classical Dutch painting, which has washed away religion only to replace it with man and his empire of things . . . Behold him, then, at the pinnacle of history, knowing no other fate than a gradual appropriation of matter.

(Barthes 1972, p. 3)

Here we have the voice of Barthes the moralist. Unfortunately he entirely – but entirely – misses the point of Dutch realism. What such pictures chiefly

represent is something quite different from the expanses of plaster and wood, the “objects” that Barthes mainly notices. What such pictures represent is precisely space, and Saenredam’s atmospheric interior spaces perhaps more than most. They make visible that neutral, common denominator medium that, above all else, is fundamental to modernity and all its projects. It is precisely the emptiness of Saenredam’s interiors that calls attention to the existence of that space, that common atmosphere “in” which the world is One: perceptible in terms of a single system of measurement. Of course such pictures show empty space; that is their whole point. The material “in” that space merely acts as a support or carrier of the powerful, overarching generalization about space and relationship that the realist painter chiefly presents. How powerful, and how easy to miss, are these media of modernity, neutral space, and neutral time. We have “naturalized” them almost completely. We move around “in” space and “in” time as if they were properties of nature instead of what they are, properties of the Modern Condition and the tools of thought appropriate to it – tools for example such as the construction of sequence as something productive and the ethic of mobility that goes with it.

The temporal counterpart of this neutral space, the neutral time of modern historical explanation, took much longer to develop but it belongs to the same descriptive conventions that made possible the painting and architecture of the Renaissance and the empirical science of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. That neutral temporality was fully fledged only in the nineteenth century and is invoked by the term “history.” It is telling that Leon Battista Alberti, whose *Della Pittura* (1435–1436) articulated the new pictorial conventions, chose the word *istoria* to name the highest achievement of that art. In other words, the historical convention is a temporal variant of a certain cultural formation that became evident in early modernity in the spatial versions of painting and architecture, then in empiricist science and philosophy, then in new mathematical principles, and eventually in the historical explanation that characterizes the nineteenth century and is fundamental to new forms of social organization. This “history” may be the most powerful achievement of modernity. The neutrality in time thus constructed is analogous to neutrality in space, also constructed by a perspective apparatus where formal agreement permits mutually informative measurement between widely separated events. The Renaissance rationalization of sight becomes in time the rationalization of consciousness, a project on which consciousness has been working ever since. The faculty and the medium – sight/space, consciousness/time – are indistinguishable. The faculty of consciousness in modernity opens all kinds of new operations in which new tools of thought are forged, not only for visual art and architecture, cartography, exploration, and empiricism but also for certain associated forms of political and social organization such as representational government and certain now-habitual conceptions of identity, simple location, structure, consciousness, the subject, and social “laws” that govern our metaphors of psychic and corporate existence.

Historical explanation

The construction of historical temporality figures centrally in this book, especially in later chapters. The time of history and project is, like its counterpart in spatial constructions, a neutral medium produced by a perspective apparatus. Like modern spatial forms, modern temporality is inscribed by historical explanation whether it appears in Darwin, or the *Journal of the American Historical Association*, or a detective novel. Historical explanation relies on what is essentially a perspective grid in time, one that, like its spatial counterpart, primarily represents not the contents of its field but the field itself: the power and possibility of neutrality in time that makes mutually informative measurement possible on a plane reaching to infinity. The material “in” that time acts as a support or carrier of the powerful, overarching generalization about the medium. This historical time has become naturalized in Eurocentric societies; we move around “in” time as if it were a property of nature instead of a property of the Modern Condition. We pursue causalities and understand outcomes in terms of a kind of historical explanation that was unknown to the ancients. A striking feature of early twentieth-century art and science is the attenuation of that neutrality. The space of pictorial realism disappears into abstraction, and relativity theory qualifies Newtonian time. This is not to say that realist painters and Newtonians disappeared, of course not, but it is to say that these were substantial signs that something foundational might be happening to the long-held assumptions of modernity. Notwithstanding the many challenges just alluded to and discussed in Chapters 2 and 4, this construction of time as a neutral medium remains for most of us merely common sense, largely thanks to nineteenth-century historians in all fields from literature and social analysis to biology and geology.

The act of modern historical awareness was not new in the nineteenth century. It ran like a bolt of energy through the era from Piero della Francesca to Erasmus and opened the horizon, both in space and time, to exploration and conquest. From this breathtaking effort and alongside cognate developments over several centuries emerged the modern idea of history: the view of time as a neutral, homogeneous medium like the space of pictorial realism in painting; a time where mutually informative measurements can be made between past, present, and future, and where all relationships can be explained in terms of a common horizon. In pictorial single-point perspective sight is rationalized by a pictorial space that, thanks to the formal consensus of realism, extends from here to eternity without encountering any disturbing fractures. The temporal analogue of that consensus is history, the convention that marks in order to align differences between the viewpoints of past, present, and future. History involves a different faculty (consciousness) and a different medium (time) but the same formation informs it as informs the spatial perspective system. By the very act of distinguishing past, present, and future the historian – and in practical ways each of us is an historian – achieves the neutralization of time which is no longer divided by divine

influence into different even competing zones, such as hell, purgatory and heaven for example. Instead, the shifting point of view in time literally produces a medium that extends from here to eternity, encountering perhaps some disturbing warps but no disturbing fractures. In history, just as in realist painting, all temporal perspectives, however remote, exotic, or widely dispersed, nevertheless "agree" in the sense that they do not contradict; and in this powerful way they, like spatial viewpoints, achieve a formal consensus that maintains time as a medium common to all regardless of location. The power to think historically creates the conditions for thinking historically; what the historian "discovers" are details saturated with the power to give mutually informative meaning, a power guaranteed by the presence of the larger abstract system that makes it possible to perceive those details in the first place. As with the rationalization of sight that accompanies the neutralization of space by the perspective apparatus, so historical thinking investigates conditions that such thinking itself creates.

This temporal counterpart of the representational grammar developed slowly for various reasons, some of which include the greater difficulty of defining consciousness, the relative difficulty of discussing sequence rather than the simultaneity of visual and spatial models, and the key fact that historical explanation developed in northern Europe where Renaissance coincided with the Reformation and centuries of religious war ensued. But despite these differences in condition, the founding grammar is the same whether the representational medium is space or time. History is thus a perspective apparatus, a form of realism, a temporal counterpart of pictorial realism.

Take, for example, this sentence: "'Our situation is bad,' he wrote to his broker." The present tense is embedded in the past as if in a frame, so that the present has a double, equivocal voice. It says both that the speaker is in a bad situation, but also that time has passed between that present and a later one which implies a different view on his situation. Between the two intersecting points of view lies the neutral time "in" which causalities unfold that will render decipherable the eventual outcome of this moment. The momentary present is both emergent, and also contained in a pattern of significance: a pattern visible from the future which is in this way continually asserted by the fact that the past is past and contained in a larger pattern of significance, however ambiguous. Every "present" in historical narrative is in this way also past, so at every moment we are continuously aware of the future which is thus implied in the very act of telling. The more orchestrated the historical elaboration of viewpoint, the more commanding is the achievement of a common horizon. Within that common horizon, and only in it, the objectification of the world becomes possible. History, and the consciousness appropriate to it, maintains a world that is one and the "same," regardless of spectator position or point of view. Historical explanation thus fully exploits the serial potential that is present even in early realist painting where the system implies a serial collection of viewpoints, a power to "walk around" objects that had not previously been seen in that light.

Historical time, and the consciousness coextensive with it, is interchangeable among individuals, at least potentially, because it is consciousness of the *same* thing: consciousness of an invariant world that changes according to certain laws which do not change, which inform (are informed by) all points of view, but which are consistent with no single point of view. Each individual perspective is limited, but according to the convention, only arbitrarily. It is only various secondary “accidents” of situation, for example, language or nationality or gender, that obscure the individual’s ability to achieve a cosmic vision. But if each individual could see all the world (so the representational convention of time goes) all would see the *same* world. Of course each individual is mortal and can travel only to a few places of the mind or the planet. But modernity minimizes that limitation, that mortality, in favor of mobility, extension, infinity, and this is important to the postmodern critique. In this, perhaps, history, or temporal realism, betrays its religious origin (on Christian sources of history and humanism see Auerbach, esp. p. 53; and Löwith).

Taken together, the inscriptions of neutrality in time and space produced nothing less than a paradigmatic shift from the Middle Ages to modernity: a shift that took several centuries to accomplish and that now is deeply rooted in practice and “common sense.” Today we assume the power of modern historical conventions, partly thanks to nineteenth-century historians, scientists, and novelists, but not exclusively to them. We also assume those conventions easily because by now, 600 years on from the Quattrocento, we are thoroughly familiar with the constructions of neutrality and objectivity that preceded modern history and made it possible. In the work of empiricist philosophers, mathematicians, scientists, and of realist painters from Piero to Pissarro – in short, from experience with high achievements during centuries of modernity – citizens of Eurocentric societies have learned historical assumptions not only directly from Walter Scott and Darwin but also sideways, as it were, from various traditions and practices that appeared much earlier than history but belonged to the same cultural stem. The Renaissance and Reformation impulses of this work marks a threshold much earlier than is often assumed when discussion of “postmodernism” refers back to the Enlightenment or to industrialization. Modernity is older than that; and postmodernity is more consequential than that. Neutral media and the “objects” they made possible were first expressed in the fourteenth century not the seventeenth and well before the Enlightenment. Even that ultimate “object” of history, the “individual subject” had to evolve from the spectator whose awareness was first comprehensively acknowledged in the time of Michelangelo and whose modern “individuality” emerged after and in some cases well after the Enlightenment (see Ermarth, 1997, Ch. 3 “Society as an Entity”).

Some who write about history like to make much of supposed continuities between contemporary life and ancient historians, so it is worth remembering that both Herodotus and Thucydides inhabited the static Greek world and that “history” in the modern sense belongs to an entirely different cultural grammar.

Modern historical conventions (the founding subject, the evolutionary process) certainly did not flourish in Greek art or philosophy, nor in Europe prior to the Renaissance, nor even in some cases as late as the mid- nineteenth century in England when we find such hugely popular narratives as *Jane Eyre* or *Vanity Fair* that still do not rely entirely on historical conventions but instead on typological and providential patterning typical of the long history of narrative before the Enlightenment. What makes history into History, whatever the subject matter, is the perspective grid in which every “now” is also a “then” and thus a tributary of an emergent pattern of significance in a world that is common to all, one and the same to all regardless of position. This history steps beyond the narrative that locates immutable patterns (for example, decline and fall) which in effect submit events to a form of typological thinking. This discussion is decidedly a non-evaluative. There is nothing wrong with typology and nothing sacred about history, just as there is nothing wrong with history and nothing sacred about typology. The interest lies in the difference, especially when the difference becomes so intensively pronounced at a certain historical “moment” around the turn of the twentieth century.

The complexity of the historical convention arises from the fact that it involves the relationship of time and consciousness. In terms of the “consensus” of perspective systems in visual art, space and sight are relatively synchronic and familiar, whereas time and consciousness are more difficult to objectify, and “in” historical (neutral) time, some paradoxes of the Modern Condition become more evident. The perspective technology that sustains the neutralization of time literally *constitutes* what it “finds,” threading together a whole series of moments and perspectives into one system and one act of attention. But perspective in time is a matter of consciousness, something more internal than mere physical position. Further, the identification between the two continuums – of time and of consciousness – means they become interchangeable just as they do in the space and sight of pictorial realism. But while this interchangeability seems relatively unproblematic in spatial and visual terms it seems counter-intuitive that time is interchangeable with consciousness. At the same time (so to speak), that interchangeability makes it more difficult to escape the mediated quality of all perception in the Modern Condition.

This particular mutuality between the neutral media of modernity and the human faculty corresponding to it rarely becomes explicit because to do so would be to compromise the whole effect and to locate a vulnerability in its presentation of objectivity. Writers, artists, men, and women about town grasp this vulnerability. When neutrality is brought into focus as an historical construct, one method among many, the peculiar paradoxes of the neutrality mechanism become evident. Although common sense may say that neutral space and time are the “natural” bases for our mutually informative measurements – those all-important agreements among varied views – the *contrary* actually is the case. The formal achievement that I’m calling the representational “consensus” *creates* the space and the time which are neutral and

“in” which we proceed to make our mutually informative measurements, arrive at our hypotheses, formulate our laws, and produce our experiments, our capital, and (that other form of capital) our knowledge. There is nothing “natural” about it.

The historical convention implies a vast potentiality for human consciousness of near-universal extension; and because any particular position on the continuum of time and consciousness is arbitrary and moveable, the historical convention also implies the exchangeability of consciousness between individuals: a sort of generic “human” consciousness, equivalent to the generic “sight” invoked by pictorial realism. Compared with the collection of voices in, say, a novel such as *War and Peace*, the formal consensus of spatial realism seems almost simple. Tolstoy’s voices all “agree” – not in the trivial sense of agreement about particular issues – but in the most powerful sense of constructing and inhabiting the “same” time, which is to say, a medium in which what happens in one moment has potential relevance for every other moment. What holds all this together is the power of the past tense alone, something that only appears fragile. “‘Our situation is bad,’ he wrote to his broker.” The formulation telegraphs the key message: not that someone is having a bad day, but that someone who was having a bad day has now moved on to something else. “He said,” may seem a slender reed with which to sustain all human time but that is its function.

The key to history in other words is perspective management: a constant shift in time from one position to another, one vantage point to another, one perspective to another, one moment to another. In pictorial realism this takes place implicitly; in narration it is literally a series of steps. Then historians come along and discuss what is “in” this time as if the objectification it has enacted – the miraculous objectification of the world – is not a cultural effect and thus not something that needs to be accounted for. The past-present shuttle constitutes the neutrality of time by coordinating *from the standpoint of “the” future* a conflicting variety into a single sequence of time and consciousness, where everything is related to everything else. What we very loosely call “the narrator” of realistic novels actually is this more generalized cultural and social power of mediation represented by the past tense. Often the term “narrator” is applied to this power of mediation, but that personalizes it and thus utterly excludes from our awareness its most important function, which is *literally to constitute historical time in the novel*. Like the realist perspective grid, the historical narrative produces a prolonged act of mediate attention that unifies and thus neutralizes the medium. The information it ostensibly conveys is merely the carrier for this far more powerful act.

So, when we take the historical medium for granted what we are really doing is accepting and reinscribing a belief – something that is no more and no less than an arbitrary, breathtaking collective act of faith – that our powers of collective agreement literally make possible historical continuity. The consciousness that goes with this historical time has various liabilities that an informed postmodern critique would highlight. For example, it is an idea of

consciousness that transcends particulars and always exceeds them. The power of this consciousness and this temporality is Nobody's power, something at once human and unspecific, powerfully present but not individualized. This historical consciousness is literally engendered by the very sequences it interprets. This flexible and composite historical medium, at once time and consciousness, literally maintains the medium of history itself by its ceaseless relay between the past and future of events, just as the single-point perspective in Renaissance painting coordinates all angles of vision into a common horizon. In history this coordination is distributed over a sequence and thus it depends on a collected consciousness to maintain it: a more intangible feat than the visual coordinations of homogenized and neutralized space, but equally powerful in extending to infinity the human capabilities it thereby inscribes.

Accomplished writers using the historical convention call attention to this power of attention in much the same way as Saenredam calls attention to space. Naïve readers set to work identifying such narrative with authors or even ignoring the production of neutral time entirely so as to focus on the "objects" that sustain it; but that is work wasted. The reflex of the past tense that asserts the continuous presence of a future is literally "Nobody" (Ermarth, 1998, Ch. 3). To identify it with a person of any description is to naturalize it and thus to defeat the large claim it makes: the claim literally to constitute historical time by threading together into one system and one act of attention a whole series of moments and perspectives. Even the terms "author" or "narrator" personifies what is a collective power without individual definition: the power to connect past and present and thus to maintain the neutrality of time. Such a neutral time, like neutral space, maintains what Meyer Shapiro wonderfully called "the immense, historically developed capacity to keep the world in mind" (p. 83). That capacity leaves nothing aside or behind. The powers thus made available to "human" consciousness are enormous and they are rational. In a convention that extends to infinity the rationalized powers of human attention, no atrocity need remain unexplained, no mystery unsolved, no mistake unrectified.

It is worth repeating that the time of modernity is neutral not "linear." *Linearity is not a feature of time.* The near ubiquity of the phrase "linear time" testifies to the mystification of temporality by empiricist habits, for example, a confusion of time with causality, or thinking of time as something "flowing" like a river. "Linear" is just a feature of narrative as it goes from one thing to the next. A cyclical narrative is still "linear"; the "line" just goes around in a circle. "In" neutral time *your* trajectory may be "linear" or even dialectical but the time itself is not. Nor does time have anything essentially to do with chronology which appears in completely ahistorical narratives both pre-modern (e.g., the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle*) and postmodern (Garcia-Marquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*). No, it is *neutrality*, and neutrality alone that distinguishes the time of modernity: the time of production, development, scientific causality, and historical explanation.

To provide a comparison from the other side of the divide between medieval and modern time, I take a short passage from the medieval *Anglo Saxon Chronicle* written about events of the seventh century (Whitelock, pp. 159–161). In this excerpt we see the discontinuity typical of medieval narrative generally. The selection begins at the year 607 and, except for the short passage indicated, nothing is left out:

607. Here Ceolwulf fought against the South Saxons.

611. Here Cynegils succeeded to the throne of Wessex and held it thirty-one years.

614. Here Cynegils and Cwichelm fought at Beaudun and killed two thousand and sixty-five Welshmen.

616. Here Aethelbert, king of Kent, died – he had reigned fifty-six years; and he was succeeded to the throne by his son, Eadbald, who gave up his baptism and lived in heathen fashion, having his father's widow for his wife. Then Laurentius, who was archbishop in Kent, planned to go south over the sea and leave it all, but the Apostle Peter came to him a night and beat him severely because he planned to abandon God's flock in this fashion, and ordered him to go to the king and preach the true faith to him. And he did so, and the king was converted and baptized

617. Here Aethelfrith, king of Northumbria, was killed by Redwald, king of East Anglia.

How different is this chronicle from the rolling resonances of historical narrative. Nobody here is interested in development between one year and another, or in “keeping the world in mind.” The only extended section corresponds to a typological pattern that sounds like something from Greek tragedy or a Freudian imaginary. The chronological marking appears almost random to modern eyes and it includes very different *kinds* of narrative, including dream events and magic as well as battles and body counts. Nothing here suggests the mediated neutralities of history, with its grammar of perspective and its shuttle between future and past. Nobody is interested in constituting the world in time.

From the other end of the modern era contrasting examples can be found everywhere and without regard to the distinction between fiction and “real” history: Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* (1831); Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1862–1869); Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward's *All the President's Men* (1974); David McCullough's *1776* (2006). The distinction between fiction and ‘real’ history is a distinction without a difference when it comes to the main agenda of inscribing and reinscribing the power of neutrality in time – what Newton or his followers called “God's time.” Whether the text is a so-called “fictional” or a so-called “real” history, the productive tensions between now and then, here and there, him and her, constitute the main focus of interest, with the same functions, and in the same ways.

In order to trace the unspoken assumptions by which such narrative commends itself to us – assumptions that differ markedly from those of both medieval and postmodern narrative – I turn to *Middlemarch*, a novel that engages readers in a somewhat more self-conscious construction of neutral time even as it pushes that convention to its limit. “The Prelude” to the novel begins as follows:

Who that cares much to know the history of man, and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time, has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa . . .

Who, indeed? Until I read *Middlemarch*, I had not given a single moment’s thought to Saint Theresa, and perhaps I am not entirely alone in this. What can George Eliot mean? And thus the characteristically self-conscious mediate mental activity begins. Does this narrator imply that people like me, who have not thought sufficiently about St. Theresa, don’t *really* care about the history of man or the experiments of Time? Does my ignorance of St. Theresa in fact mark me as an uncaring philistine? I find myself feeling annoyed at the implication. Or, alternatively, is this narrator simply naive in believing that all humane people think of St. Theresa? I find myself feeling impatient with such narrowness. Or, just possibly, does this passage contain some irony at my expense, as I become aware of my own attempt to cope with the doubled perspective from which the historian forces me to view events and even my place in them? In that doubleness, that gap between now and then, opens all the opportunity for error, development, explanation, and insight by which historical narrative recommends to us its version of the humanist project. This gap is fully exploited by writers like George Eliot and exploited to a greater or lesser degree by all historical narrative.

Reading George Eliot always involves short, silent mental scuffles of this kind, precisely because her agenda includes probing the limits of this convention; and as I continue reading to the end of the opening sentence, annoyed, interested, and impatient, such scuffles continue to produce static in the margins of the so-called “message”; it is about St. Theresa, but it is also about that activity I’m forced to be self-consciously engaged in: an activity of mediating difficulty and of always seeking a larger picture. In this case that wider horizon includes Moors, the terrain of Avila, nationalism, children’s aspiration and adult responsibility:

[who] has not smiled with some gentleness at the thought of the little girl walking forth one morning hand-in-hand with her still smaller brother, to go and seek martyrdom in the country of the Moors? Out they toddled from rugged Avila, wide-eyed and helpless as two fawns, but with human hearts, already beating to a national idea; until domestic reality met them in the shape of uncles, and turned them back from their great resolve.

After rapidly delivering further information about St. Theresa's later adventures – about her epic, ideal nature, and about the religious order she reformed – then, finally, the narrator produces one of those characteristic comparisons with which George Eliot so often generalizes particulars, especially at the beginning of her books: a gesture that involves establishing, among the nearly overwhelming weight of material and historical difference, the crucial common denominator.

That Spanish woman who lived 300 years ago, was certainly not the last of her kind. Many Theresas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity; perhaps a tragic failure which found no sacred poet and sank unwept into oblivion.

With this brief narrative gesture George Eliot not only introduces her heroine and the wider political issues of her day, she makes the characteristic gesture of Western philosophy and science since the sixteenth century: the comparison of things widely separated in time and space in order to discover their hidden affinity, their buried similitude, the “depth” where essence is contained. The canvas is as wide as historical time itself and the agenda is the same as that of Raphael's painting, *The School at Athens*, inviting the Pope in his Vatican study to see the links between his day and that of Socrates. Here, as there, the consensus of the perspective apparatus operates literally to create historical connection between past and present simply by suggesting their mutual relevance. The medium conveys the most important message. Through its perpetual shifts between past and present, between private and public, between intention and act, between estranged members of families or societies, this historical narrative mediates the gaps even as it marks them.

The pleasures of these historical texts lie in pursuing the delicious slide from one point of awareness to another, collecting the possible points of view into a single system of relationship and in the comparative spirit that makes every detail count. While Trollope or Stendhal do not bully their readers as much as George Eliot or Tolstoy do, and while Eliot and Tolstoy call the convention into question more than Trollope or Stendhal do; still the founding convention is the same in all cases. Thus the language of the narrative – literally the sequence of sentences – keeps alive continually the fact that any event can only be viewed objectively if we take it from a variety of possible angles. That variety of possible viewpoints, because the grammar of perspective coordinates them, belong to a common time, a neutralized time that does not end as a character might think at the end of a marriage but, on the contrary, that maintains the open horizon, the common and neutral time that literally permits the objectification of the world. This historical grammar of perspective by which all vantages belong to the same extendable medium does not merely describe a common and objective world but literally constructs

that objectivity by means of that perspective system. The shift from medieval chronicle to this is of the same magnitude as the shift from medieval icons to Vermeer.

The nineteenth century was the apogee of history as an explanatory system. Its large claims are represented tellingly in the film version of Kingsley Amis's academic novel, *Lucky Jim*, where the head of the History Department, a substantial mountain of a man, picks up the ringing telephone and intones sonorously, "History Speaking." In the nineteenth century we find myriad examples of "History Speaking" in the comprehensive sense: in Walter Scott, the brilliant creator of a new kind of narrative for a revolutionary age, and in the work of his many heirs among novelists and other writers; in the historical agendas of Darwinian science and increasingly of geological and earth sciences; in the emphasis on autobiography and confessional writing; in cultural and social histories such as those by Carlyle and Macaulay; and above all (especially after 1848), in the novel as history, particularly what Victorians called "the three-decker" novel, fittingly named after a particularly stalwart kind of battleship. By contrast, in Jane Austen's narratives, the history of error ends because she is not interested in the neutrality of history as a positive option except perhaps in her last novel. But the history of error is precisely what produces historical time, so the history of error never ends in most 'historical' narrative. By the mid-nineteenth century history has become the ruling convention of a particular social order, right down to the synchronized clock time for railroads which was not a cause but a symptom and consequence of the cultural events that had produced "history." This unprecedented idea of time took hold and remains for most of us an almost automatic pilot. Historical time is the only conceivable kind: homogeneous, infinite, unproblematic, and unconfigured by exotic influences like furies, or gods, or cultural systems. *Within* time (or space) you can differ; but you can't differ *with* time and space.

Or can you?

2 The Discursive Condition

The challenge to the Modern Condition is at heart a critique of neutrality, and of everything neutrality has made possible during the six centuries of modern hegemony. The stakes are substantial, but advancing discussion about these stakes has been next to impossible thanks to disciplinary blinkers that have produced many incompatible operating definitions of “modernity” and that have foreclosed on recognition of this terminological disagreement. Usage of the term “modern” continues to be thoroughly uncoordinated and consequently usages of the term “postmodern” has continued to blur any possibility of learning exactly what is being challenged and exactly what is at stake.

Locating modernity

In one usage, “modern” can indicate a fairly local event in the arts around the turn of the twentieth century, the event of “modernism”; any challenge to that “modern” remains a fairly local event in the arts of a certain period and one subject to the limitation of all disciplinary discussions: that they isolate particulars from their mixed, even messy context in order to pursue “developments” within a putative history. That constructive business can lead quite far from the immediate circumstances where relationships with cognate events might lead in different directions or suggest different constructions. A second usage of the term “modern” treats it as a constant feature of historical process whereby every new generation is “modern” relative to the old one, even, presumably, in the medieval era of St. Augustine, or the Athens of the fifth century B.C. This idea of “modern” would not even be worth a passing thought except for the fact that it indicates the degree to which modern assumptions and methods of historical explanation, despite their relatively recent origin, have become foundational and have eclipsed even the possibility of other, radically different assumptions about process, identity, time, and sequence. Neither St. Augustine nor fifth century B.C. Athenians would have had any time for the idea that life involves open-ended processes of development.

A third idea of “modern” traces modernity to the Enlightenment, in other words to the era since the mid- to late seventeenth century efflorescence of

scientific rationalism and its technological and industrial outcomes. This idea of the modern has caught on in North America, especially the United States, where the Enlightenment is synonymous with Creation. It brought us democracy, science, and industrialization. No need to look further back. Challenges to this “modernity” have been the subject of influential treatments of “postmodernism” as either a symptom of decay or a war on Everything We Hold Dear. However this “modern” is a substantially Northern European cultural development and, while no one doubts its importance, few seem interested in the fact that framing the “modern” as marked by the Enlightenment cuts off both modernity and the Enlightenment from their foundations. The new methods and ideas pursued at the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge (founded 1660) would not have been possible without the new methods and ideas pursued in the Quattrocento, including the invention of neutrality and objectivity discussed in Chapter 1. To discuss the challenge to the Enlightenment without reference to its foundations makes it impossible to say much of value about what is really at stake in the challenge.

Commentators wedded to this third definition of modernity – and they are legion – tend to assume as given that the Enlightenment is the origin and end of all value, especially political value, so that challenges to modernity can be understood as simply sacrilegious. Such assumptions appear in too many instances to count. You know who you are. I mention only two as examples. The first is a recent book, in many ways one of the better books of its kind, that purports to explain *Postmodernism for Historians*. It represents the multitude of discussions that “address” the issues by rushing to the rescue of the Enlightenment. This book does at least address the problem posed by the challenges featured in the present book, does make an effort to explain the main discussions concerning the conditions of knowledge, and does focus on some topics key to understanding what is new. But the author claims that modernity “lasted from 1800 to about 1960” (Brown, p. 13), treats language as if it were words, mainly a matter of independent “signs” rather than sign-systems, and claims that “discourse” is “quite easily” recognized as “a message embedded in signs” (ibid., pp. 60–61). In this discussion the “postmodern historian” (if that is not a contradiction in terms) sounds exactly like the conventional historian: one who “must conduct empirical research establishing that events occurred and the order of them, checking sources that verify the facts of the case” (ibid., p. 10). This author uses terms like “language” and “discourse” and even “postmodern” as if their meanings were more or less secure and as if no real difficulty exists in bringing together conventional history and “postmodernism.” The author has followed the leader (quite a herd actually) in assuming modernity begins and is coextensive with the Enlightenment which is regarded not as a phase but as a kind of ultimate destination. By restricting modern to Enlightenment, *Postmodernism for Historians* removes from the field of evidence any trace of the events that made the Enlightenment possible, that preceded it by two centuries at least, and that “postmodernity” puts at risk.

A second example, more briefly, comes from an anthropological study of ritual in New Guinea where contemporary cultural conditions in Western societies are characterized as “postmodern” because they lack the “solitude and one-to-one intimacy” traceable to “the Renaissance” and claiming that, therefore “postmodern tribalism is (in contemporary ‘Western’ societies) medievalism under the auspices of technology” (Schechner, pp. 120–129, 136–143). This dualistic reversal is one of several that make the author’s style winningly catchy, and the historical horizon is at least wide enough to include “the Renaissance” as a threshold of modernity, but a big canvas requires careful usage so as not to beg key questions and unfortunately there is no sorting the terminological tangle here. If modernity involves solitude and one-to-one intimacy I want to know about it, but that is all left grand and vague. Things are not improved when, a little further on, the horizon shrinks back to the familiar parameters and “modern” indicates “industrial” and thus a period traceable not to the Renaissance but to the eighteenth century and, yes, the Enlightenment.

It will be clear from the previous chapter that I use the term “modern” in a fourth sense and as historians have used it, to indicate “post-medieval,” or, the culture distinct from and subsequent to that of the Middle Ages. *That* modernity is the one under challenge and *that* modernity is the culture of humanist rationality that was constructed and disseminated in Renaissance and Reformation Europe, that made modern science possible as well as realism in art, representation in politics, and that eventually made possible historical explanation as it is now conventionally understood. This modernity is older than the Enlightenment, but not as old as the Greeks whose rationalism has been a target of the French philosophers who have been especially influential in theorizing the “postmodern,” for example Jean-François Lyotard, Luce Irigaray, and Jacques Derrida. The root of the epistemological problem in the Discursive Condition may indeed be Plato, but the particular form that problem has taken took foundational definition in Renaissance and Reformation Europe, not primarily earlier, and not primarily later. Focusing on the foundation of modernity thus conceived yields different results from those available in the more local discussions (usually justifications) of Enlightenment modernity or twentieth-century modernism. While stabilizing usage is not by any means the main issue, accomplishing that would do away with the cloud of terminological obfuscation that has made it difficult for even the well-meaning to grasp what is at stake.

The challenge to modernity

The challenge to modernity that interests me here – the challenge to the modernity that succeeded the Middle Ages – is a challenge to the impressive achievements of what I call the “culture of representation” as it has existed in the West for more than half a millennium. That modernity has supported all the common denominator projects of that culture – empirical science, realist

art, democratic politics, even, to an extent, capitalism, and eventually historical explanation as we now understand it. That modernity has sustained substantial challenge for more than a century and across the range of practice, but it still determines our tools of thought and influences our most fundamental conceptions of identity and sequence. Such a challenge calls for non-trivializing attention.

The current chapter deals with the main challenge to modernity in all its forms: the disruption of neutrality as a commanding value. That challenge, which has arisen from sources as different as physics and linguistics, turns on a broadly based recognition of the systemic limitations of all meaning and value. To focus on defining the Discursive Condition as precisely as possible I begin with an example from a “field” apparently quite far from the realm of cultural assumptions: Einstein’s theory of relativity. When Einstein sought to explain that theory to a general audience, he used a train metaphor that goes like this. You are riding on a moving train and I am standing on the ground beside the track. You have a very sophisticated set of instruments which you can use to measure the length of the train, its velocity, the volume of the cars, how long it takes to get from A to B, and come up with valid, accurate, verifiable measurements. From my position on the ground beside the tracks and using my equally sophisticated instruments, I can measure the length, velocity, and volume of the train and how long it takes to get from A to B, and can come up with valid accurate, verifiable measurements. There is just one problem. The two sets of measurement differ. Both are valid, and yet they are not “the same.” There is no secure basis for reconciling them because they belong to two different inertial systems. Ground position is also in motion in ways consistent with gravitational pull, but it is not the same motion as that measurable from the train.

The scandal is not so much that the measurements differ, something that in the Modern Condition we would accommodate scientifically by seeking a higher level of generalization or a common denominator with which to reconcile our measurements. The scandal is that both measurements are valid and their differences are not reconcilable in terms of a common denominator. The Lorentz Transformations permit local, temporary reconciliations, but the temporal common denominator, Newton’s absolute time – what he or his followers called “God’s time” – no longer functions as the constant (Mook and Vargish, p. 30). In relativity theory time is a dimension of events, not an envelope for them. Each measurement is equally valid given its inertial system, its conditions of measurement, and there is no escape from the inertial system, no escape from those conditions. No formal agreement exists – such as the one offered by the perspective technology discussed in Chapter 1 – to authorize any faith that this gap between systems can be bridged in any but local and temporary ways. There is no consensus apparatus. The gap is the gap.

In order even to think of reconciling our measurements for temporary and local purposes, we have to measure not just the “object” putatively “in” time

and space, but the systems of measurement themselves. There is no way to fudge this: no way, for example, to speak of the train as in “itself” it really is. There is no such “object” because such objects cannot exist in a descriptive horizon where there are no universal, neutral common denominators such as the neutral time and space provided by the Modern Condition. Without those neutral common denominators it simply becomes impossible to refer from two different systems to “the same” train. Without the common denominator, attention shifts from objects and objectivity, to measurement. This is not to say there is no train in itself as it “really” is, but only that we cannot know it, so we can only guess or believe. What we can measure then shifts to the terms and conditions of our measurement.

Is there a problem here? Well, yes, if you cannot tolerate foundational system diversity, in other words, foundational methodological diversity; and despite its claims to infinite capacity, the neutral time of modernity – historical time as we know it – can tolerate anything *but* system-diversity. The ostensibly capacious historical medium rests on a formal “consensus” or perspective apparatus that is exactly like that of spatial perspective systems and that *guarantees agreement, or at least lack of disagreement*, at the level of method. The principle of non-contradiction is affirmed. To employ the frame of reference consisting of the past-present-future triad, or to employ the “and then and then” record of causality is to invoke and to re-inscribe the common denominator time that unifies the world within a single system of measurement. Only in that world of measurement can we arrive at a description of objects that are one and the same regardless of spectator position: objects on which all viewpoints can “agree.” Although Einstein’s theory explained mainly measurement of the micro- and macro-universe, his results certainly influence the ordinary universe and he used an ordinary example to explain the problem.

A strikingly similar description of systemic values appears in a field that might seem quite remote from theoretical physics: in Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of language. Like Einstein, Saussure also worked in the first decade of the twentieth century, in Geneva, Switzerland, just a few miles down the road from Berne where Einstein was formulating the Special Theory of Relativity. Saussure’s ideas and his influence have been so widely recognized that one might reasonably ask, why rehearse them here? The simple answer is because Saussure’s ideas have been plagued by the same terminological confusion that characterizes the discussion of what is “modern,” and because the practical implications of his ideas have not been pursued, probably because, like Einstein’s, they are simple but counter-intuitive. The simplicity sticks; but the counter-intuition slides away from one’s grasp. In the case of Saussure this has helped to obscure his practical implications.

Language, understood in Saussure’s terms, occupies the same foundational place in the Discursive Condition as neutrality holds in the Modern Condition. In terms of the present discussion “language” and “linguistic” indicate Saussure’s work, not Wittgenstein. Discussions of the so-called “linguistic turn” often have very little to do with Saussure’s idea of language and, by

not recognizing the difference between Saussure and Wittgenstein, compound the terminological confusion already mentioned by perpetuating yet another unrecognized difference. According to Saussure languages are differential systems of meaning and value. This is true of verbal languages, but also of all systems of meaning and value that operate like language such as body language, garment language, traffic signals, unspoken codes of behavior in the office, the family, the corporate board room, and so on. Readers familiar with the territory will remember the “moment” when in Derrida’s words “language invaded the universal problematic” and “everything became discourse – provided we can agree on this word” (Derrida, p. 280). Where neutrality and its objectivity once were, code now is. And by code I mean the semiological systems Saussure considers to be fundamentally linguistic. In this context everything, including ideas and methods long assumed to be “natural” – such as the rules of evidence or the nature of identity – can only be understood systemically: as systems or parts of systems that operate like language defined as Saussure defines it.

At the risk of seeming to repeat the obvious, it is necessary to revisit some key ideas from Saussure precisely because they have been so much discussed. This has given the false impression that, as one graduate student from a mid-Atlantic university said recently, in response to my assertion that we still have something to learn from Saussure, “I thought we had already done that.” My claim is that Saussure’s fundamental idea, while it may be familiar, requires methodological change of a magnitude that has been attempted by only a few. Let us say that, yes, as diligent scholars we do “know” Saussure’s claims for semiology and consider them to be serious ideas, as have many illustrious predecessors. Saussure’s theory calls for action, creative input, “enunciation” within the set of semiological systems for which each of us is responsible. New vocabulary may seem necessary but it certainly is not sufficient and has led to obfuscation if not hilarity. Methodological revolution may be in order. Each of us may be responsible for providing for everyone else a map of the discursive rules we operate under in multiples on a daily basis, that authorize our prodigious individual awareness, and that we never think about. Saussure opens that level of challenge [what are *your* syntactical structures?]. Response has been light. So with this introduction here again is some discussion of the directions Saussure points toward, and why going in those directions involves more than knowing about his theory, it presses toward active response to the challenge they represent. That challenge is nothing less than to re-position in his terms our most fundamental and habitual ideas about meaning and value. Caught as we are between two fundamentally different conditions, two tectonic cultural plates, it could be interesting work.

Discourse is systemic potential

Saussure gave currency to three ideas of particular interest for the present argument: first, the idea that the systemic values of language systems operate

differentially; second, that everything is language; third, the idea that there is a permanent gap between a linguistic system (*langue*) on the one hand and, on the other hand, any particular specification of such a system (*parole*). In varying degrees these three ideas have received less attention than Saussure's diagrams (assuming they are his) with their points about the arbitrariness of language, but these three are more groundbreaking.

For anyone new to Saussure some biographical background: Saussure taught his ideas about language at University of Geneva around the turn of the twentieth century after a brilliant early career both in Switzerland and, for the ten years preceding his famous lecture course, in Paris. When he died at the relatively young age of fifty-six those lectures seemed so important to his students that a few of them collated their class notes and published them in 1915 as *Cours de linguistique générale*. Half a century later in 1959 Wade Baskin translated it into English. This little book has for a century provided inspiration to philosophers, anthropologists, feminists, and cultural historians intent upon re-inventing and renewing social, intellectual, and political practice. While the *Course* may be more useful as a quarry than as a finished argument, nevertheless its venturesome formulations continue to inspire creative solutions across the range of fields and practices.

The first idea of the three I mentioned appears in a passage from the section on "Linguistic Value." It is about something all artists know: that "value" is a formal matter, not a matter of something supposedly contained "in" the form (its alleged "content"). It is the method that makes the pictorial realism, not the putative content (the Virgin and Child, a town square, a girl with a water jug). The artist, and the informed theorist back at least as far as Aristotle, is interested in "the content of the form" (the title of Hayden White's 1989 book). Saussure claimed that linguistic value is "purely differential," that is, language values are only intelligible systemically and negatively, not positively or in isolation from systemic relationships. This passage from Saussure begins with some particulars concerning comparative systemic treatment of time as examples of linguistic difference, and then comments on the difference it makes culturally:

Distinctions of time, which are so familiar to us, are unknown in certain languages. Hebrew does not recognize even the fundamental distinctions between the past, present, and future. Proto-Germanic has no special form for the future; to say that the future is expressed by the present is wrong, for the value of the present is not the same in Germanic as in languages that have a future along with the present. The Slavic languages regularly single out two aspects of the verb: the perfective represents action as a point, complete in its totality; the imperfective represents it as taking place, and on the line of time. The categories are difficult for a Frenchman to understand, for they are unknown in French; if they were predetermined, this would not be true. Instead of pre-existing ideas, then, we find in all

the foregoing examples *values* emanating from the system. When they are said to correspond to concepts, it is understood that the concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not.

(Saussure, 1959, p. 115)

During the initial list of comparative examples Saussure touches in passing on his point made elsewhere in the *Course* that language is arbitrary. The comparison of languages with regard to their “distinctions of time” shows that there is no necessary link with nature, no referential anchor; the construction of time itself depends on a particular language system, just as time in Einstein’s theory depends on a particular inertial system. If language were “natural” we would all speak the same language; if it is arbitrary, as Saussure claims, then its detachment from nature – its arbitrariness – means that understanding it requires systemic knowledge (perhaps one should say “knowledges.”)

The next step is more radical, and involves understanding that in language systems, meaning and value is differential; and understood negatively, the most precise characteristic of a word-concept is in being what the others in that system are not. The words “dog” or “chien” can be understood *only* within the systemic values of English or of French. This point, like so much in Saussure, may seem obvious enough to anyone who knows at least a bit about a second, non-native language. But there are other implications. The arbitrariness of language is also its autonomy. It has capacities and limitations created by the usages of centuries; individuals are born into that operation and, to an extent, are operated by it in the sense that the language enables and limits what we can and cannot say, what we can or cannot do. This is not, as some claim, a theory of individuals as automatons, or language zombies; it *is* about being located, here rather than there, and somewhere rather than nowhere, with regard to available semiological systems at our particular moving locus amid the range of possibility. There is no escape, no alternative, to that engagement in the Discursive Condition. And, as Saussure’s examples of “time distinctions” (or lack of them) suggest, systemic differences can be profound. Learning a language is more than a vocabulary exercise; it requires an understanding of the language as system, an understanding that generally remains tacit.

The differential function of language is the most counter-intuitive step Saussure takes, even though it is familiar to anyone who has ever momentarily slipped out of linguistic familiarity with a word in his or her native language, and for just a moment that perfectly familiar word suddenly becomes a stranger. In that brief estrangement comes a recognition of the arbitrariness of language and of the systemic values within which alone it signifies. By emphasizing the differential function of language Saussure insists that the linguistic system alone, not some extra-linguistic perception of externality, determines whatever meaning and value we can articulate and in fact

determines consciousness itself. This only seems simple. *Chien* and *dog* do not refer to the “same” thing because their meaning is determined by reference within their respective linguistic systems. Consequently, says Saussure, we understand the word “dog” not because it refers to a hairy four-legged creature which the French call “chien” but because in English “dog” is “not-log” and “not-bog” and “not-doll” and “not-dot.” Knowledge of linguistic value is thus reflexive in the sense that it arises from a complex, subliminal, nearly miraculous knowledge of an entire system of differentiations which indicates how to understand the word “dog” and its function. *Dog* is most precise when we know most about what it is not. From the point of view of the Modern Condition the counter-intuitive part is the claim that linguistic meaning *only* arises negatively within the system of differential relationships: the claim that meaning itself is arbitrary, not “positively” constituted by reference to externality. To understand anything means to understand its function in a differential system of meaning and value, in other words, in terms of a code. Within that code the more we know about what something is *not*, the more we can understand how it functions and thus what it “means.” Linguistic value arises not positively but negatively from a complex, largely subliminal system of differentiations. *Difference is constitutive in the Discursive Condition; reference, representation, resemblance are not.*

This description of language as systemic and differential flew in the face of centuries of positivist development in which language was treated as a neutrality along with neutral time and neutral space: one of the powerful, neutral, and transparent media of modernity. It is a coincidence to savor that, at almost precisely the same cultural moment as Saussure was dismissing the neutrality of language, Einstein was arriving at a new description of nature that also rejected the transparency or neutrality of scientific measurement and that required it to take itself into account when describing any putatively “objective” phenomenon or event.

The second key idea of Saussure’s that presents a challenge to modernity is this: that *all* systems of meaning and value operate like verbal language, differentially. In fact, all such systems *are* languages – discursive systems that may or may not have verbal elements. Almost as an aside Saussure predicts that his approach to linguistics would develop into a new science called “semiology,” thus anticipating the general use of reflexive linguistic systems as methodological models for analyzing cultural systems that have not yet even been named, so pervasive is the modern assumption of a world that is measurable as one and the same regardless of position. Saussure predicted that the new semiological science’s

main concern will still be the whole group of systems grounded on the arbitrariness of the sign. In fact, every means of expression used in society is based in principle, on collective behavior or – what amounts to the same thing – on convention. Polite formulas, for instance, though often

imbued with a certain natural expressiveness (as in the case of a Chinese who greets his emperor by bowing down to the ground nine times), are nonetheless fixed by rule; it is this rule and not the intrinsic value of the gestures that obliges one to use them. Signs that are wholly arbitrary realize better than the others the ideal of the semiological process; that is why language, the most complex and universal of all systems of expression, is also the most characteristic; in this sense linguistics can become the master-pattern for all branches of semiology although language is only one particular semiological system.

(Saussure, p. 68)

Saussure's second big idea, then, is to treat *all* systems of meaning and value as languages: that is, as semiological systems that produce meaning through systemic and differential function. It means, for example, that the human sciences can only understand human practices – domestic, political, scientific – if they seek out the implicit system(s) in which a practice functions differentially. That quest requires acceptance, at the foundation of method, that *it is never possible to approach human practices directly as free-standing positivities or objects but only as differential functions of systems*. Diplomacy? A language. Marriage? Language. Academic conferences? Pure language. Universities? City planning? A multinational corporation? Architecture? Traffic control? Fashion? Political campaigns? NAFTA? The market? History? Your family dynamic? All to be understood systemically, as differential systems of meaning and value, or, language as Saussure defines it. When Derrida traces the shift beyond modernity to the “moment when language invaded the universal problematic,” and when Foucault says that we do not choose to make a difference, because “we are difference” (Foucault, 1972, p. 131), they both invoke the simple but revolutionary terms represented by Saussure's claim that all identities, meanings, and values, are differential, not positive in nature. It is all language, or all “discourse,” now. Everything is language, everything is writing, and in the expanded sense Saussure sponsors in which language and writing are things we do in non-verbal ways as well as in verbal ones: in this sense everything is discourse. Discursive systems are the condition of consciousness and knowledge; in other words, we inhabit a Discursive Condition not a modern one.

It was practically another Reformation. The Modern Condition favors a universal consensus apparatus which neutralizes the medium (of space or time) within which the multitude of different systems can then all be seen to belong to a common system of measurement. If the common denominator requires us to increase the level of abstraction, that is just the cost of universal and open-ended commonalty. The assumption of that common denominator makes it not only possible but unavoidably “natural” to objectify the world. The Discursive Condition erases that possibility. Where one semantic universe formerly was, irreconcilable semantic universes now are: not just in terms of verbal language, but in terms of every system of meaning and value. Where

once there was a distinction between language and so-called Reality, now languages, including all semiological systems not just verbal languages, actually constitute whatever we can know of realities so that the term “reality” must wear quotes to indicate its systemic function.

Inhabiting a semiological system (language), then, means inhabiting a reality, and that so-called “reality” (one begins to search for ways to qualify once-unproblematic terms) changes with the semiological system (*langue*). The fact that I inhabit simultaneously multiple semiological systems (languages) increases the complexity of being a subject of enunciation – a multiplicity that not even Saussure discusses. I write or speak simultaneously as a citizen, academic, parent, Manchester United fan, and sixty other things; all of them belong to the particular, undecidable collocation of rule regimens that constitute the unique condition of a life. From this complex, finite, rarely explicit set of systemic possibilities, I specify (more or less creatively) this or that particular enunciation. I “write” in several languages simultaneously in an astonishingly complex, nearly miraculous act of continuing enunciation. Perhaps we could even say that where “the market” once was, individual systems now are – this local bank, that conglomerate, and the unspoken systemic rules that constitute the governing language of each. But with this I have introduced prematurely the powerful idea of enunciation.

Saussure’s third seminal idea has to do with the persistent gap (it calls to mind the gap between measurements in relativity theory) – between *langue* and *parole*. Language always involves a relay between a systemic potential (*langue*) and the particular specifications of that system (*parole*). A language, verbal or not, is a finite, organized system of possibility which is never realized fully by any particular specification of it. Any particular enunciation amounts to only one tiny actualization of that systemic possibility. The key difference lies between the systemic potential on the one hand and, on the other hand, the particular specifications (enunciations, sentences, speech acts, *paroles*) that represent only tiny parts of that potential. This distinctive gap between language and enunciation is an important new tool of thought because of the power it gives to immediate practice.

This difference between *langue* and *parole*, familiar though it may be, presents an interpretive problematic that is new. The new problem – and new opportunity – arises from the peculiar status of the sign system, whether it is a verbal system, a traffic-control system, or other political or economic or social operating system. That peculiar status is this: that the sign system is in itself (fortunately) unrealizable, at the same time as it provides the governing basis for specifications that never come close to exhausting its potential. So long as it remains a living system, the “language” remains capable of new specifications (enunciations) and does not become “totalized” (Levi-Strauss’s term), or dead. Once Latin had been fully realized it died as a language, that is, as a systemic potential, and thus it became useful to modern science as a tag system for botanical or medical identification. Its words mean only one

thing so it has no longer that capacity for new specification typical of living languages.

This crucial distinction between potential (*langue*) and enunciation (*parole*), raises a question as to the ontological status of any “language” or discourse and points toward the core of collective value that Saussure’s theory implies. This also is not as simple as it may seem. It certainly has little to do with the kind of group activism imagined in some social and political theorists. The collective value of a language, or discursive system, does not have a simple location. For example, where, exactly, *is* English? Nobody doubts that it does exist, and that as such it differs powerfully from Swahili or Urdu. Obviously the sequence, “colorless green ideas sleep furiously,” is an English sentence, though it may have little of that product called “meaning.” Just as obviously, the same five words in different order – “colorless furiously ideas green sleep” – is not an English sentence despite the presence of English words. Language is more than words, it is a rule-based system. But it is one where there is no There there. Clearly English is somewhere, but where? Not, surely, in grammar books made up after the fact and listing rules that are always ignored by wise schoolchildren taking tests. Its functions are not spoken, even by grammarians. No one ever actually says to their friend, “subject, verb, object” – those relationships are understood; the “language” part of the system is implicit. Instead, they say, “I reject authority,” in other words, they specify an assumed system without ever referring to it directly and without exhausting it. The speech act is finite; the language is not. Whatever “English” is, it is entirely disseminated. Its rules are the implicit knowledge of all (and only) native speakers. In short, English demonstrably exists and its existence is precise enough to enable native speakers to recognize a mistake even though they could not say which rule is being broken. Nevertheless, the language per se is unrecoverable. We can only “recognize” it in this or that specification, never as such, in the abstract, despite grammar books and diagrams however helpful they may seem. This goes by extension for any semiological system, whether verbal or not.

Re-read the foregoing analysis substituting for “English,” the term “discourse,” the term that leads beyond verbal languages to all the differential systems of meaning and value, in other words, all semiological systems whether they are body languages, garment languages, the languages of international diplomacy, of various nationalisms, of organizations, of political influence, of aesthetic value, of domestic violence, of fashion, of economics, and so on. Whatever the *langue*, or discursive system of potential, the arena of subjective freedom lies in that all-important gap between the potential capacities of a given semiotic code on the one hand and, on the other hand, any particular specification of it. This “Tender Interval” (Nabokov’s phrase for something only slightly different) in-between language (*langue*) and enunciation (*parole*) constitutes a set of conditions entirely different from those belonging to the common denominator universe of modernity, its objectivities, its positivities, its located and distanced viewpoints: different especially as it bears on the definition of objects including that interesting object, the “individual” subject (Ermarth, 1992, pp. 106–138).

Saussure's semiotic systems – both verbal and non-verbal – *revalue difference* in ways that also mark radical departure from modern precedents. In modernity, difference inspires a search for common denominators, if necessary at ever higher levels of generalization; that is necessary to scientific classification where, for example, a whale's fins are disposable so far as concerns scientific identification of the creature. Such details and differences are only disposable clues to a more abstract and ultimately empirical "fact" based Truth. Semiological (or semiotic) difference, on the other hand, is constitutive not incidental, and it is semiotic because it always belongs to one system or another. *There is no such thing as a free-range fact*. Even the facts "discovered" by empiricists are constructs of the formal agreements upon which such constructs depend. Semiotic systems never claim or even seek the kind of unanimity characteristic in the Modern Condition with its universal, one-world systems: one world in time, one world in space, one world in "human" interest.

If Saussure's claims about language are familiar their implications are not judging by the relatively slender evidence, in North America especially, of the action his theory prompts. For people using the mental tools provided by modernity – and that is most of us in the West – language refers with unremarkable transparency to an objective world, in much the same way visual realism refers, or appears to refer. Like realist art, realist language is representational – a window on the world as unproblematic as a plane of glass for someone looking out of a window. In the Discursive Condition the glass is opaque, and this very window is a problem. The surrealist painter, René Magritte, frequently plays with the "window on the world" approach to art, with its windows and transparencies, and with the supposedly unproblematic nature of the threshold between seer and what is seen. Julio Cortázar recommends in *Hopscotch* (Ch. 147) – one of the best available doses of "discourse" – that when we throw the tools of modernity out the window we should remember to throw the *window* out the window. In the Discursive Condition there is no transparent pane of glass, no representational window, no neutrality of language or medium: not now as you are reading and, more importantly, not when you get into your car to go home, or plan your schedule. There is only the palimpsest of codes or range of discursive systems (*languages*) unique to each person depending on accidents of birth, that constitute our "condition" and consciousness, and that formats invisibly the range of possibility. If a discursive system refers to anything, it refers to itself in the sense that its meanings are born of and within its systemic potentials and are not reflections of an objective universe. Such languages are self-contained systems of meaning production, not in the sense of having *meanings* already formed but in the sense of having the *rules* for meaning-construction already formed. In the Modern Condition consciousness exists independently from language and languages are among the tools which that autonomous consciousness picks up and puts down for its instrumental purposes. In the Discursive Condition, consciousness depends upon language and would hardly

exist without it. It is in this sense that language speaks us: in providing access to coherences seasoned by long usage.

The self-reflexiveness of discursive regimens has been interpreted, wrongly, as something closed, like a prison, or even, incredibly, something to do with selfishness. Such absurd conclusions derive from applying modern tools of thought in the Discursive Condition where they do not belong. This kind of mistake is encouraged by the dualistic formulations and functions that still litter the language and govern thought, including such dualistic formulations about language as Kristeva's "dispositions" which must be either symbolic or semiotic, paternal or maternal: either cling to embattled reason or lose it in the dissociated rattle of semiosis. Such either/or formulae hamper language's capacity for both/and, they distract from the functioning of language as Saussure describes it, and they provide a continual cycling around within a closed and long-familiar terminological system with no point of access to a new horizon. These kinds of formulation treat language as a sealed system, a prison house, a sort of Truman Show of "discourse" in which there is no escape from the pre-ordained scripts. This is the farthest thing from the generous impulses of language in the Discursive Condition.

This linguistic model moves well beyond the "relativism" that was already well-known from the eighteenth century and that was long a part of modernity. Seventeenth-century cosmology was quite familiar with "the plurality of worlds" problem, just as twentieth-century politics is familiar with "diversity" problems. Such problems have been typical in the Modern Condition where they spur a search for some common denominator such as political or economic law, the nation state, human values, neutral space and time – that will provide the sought common denominator. That's "relativism." It is the engine of rationalization in the Modern Condition (Ermarth, 1983, pp. 1–97). Relativity belongs to the Discursive Condition and that is an entirely different matter; there is no point in searching for universal common denominators where there are only systems, including the ones that posit neutral space and time, and where any possible mediation between discursive regimens must be temporary and local.

In many ways, the idea that everything is language, or discourse, provides a better map of how things actually work in the field than do the maps provided by the fading empiricist models of modernity including the model of "structure" that is associated with perfection and belongs to western knowledge since the Greeks. Saussure's semiological model works differently and does not have anything to do with that ancient impulse to fully express the ideal. Those models are no longer functioning efficiently in a world all too familiar with the foundational conflict between systems: in the new technological and global environment where "media" can be bought and sold and where everyone under thirty knows what an operating system is; where power is distributed in oil companies, cartels, and world banks not individual constituents; and where political discourse is hedged around with ideological conflicts and market metaphors. This familiarity is part of the challenge to the Modern Condition with its faith in libraries, universities, and democratic

politics; its reliance on laws, on production, on empirical science, on the concept of a "human nature," on historical explanation; its faith above all in neutrality and objectivity.

Because it is so hard to say something new it is difficult even to formulate the problem adequately. Conventional usage re-asserts itself so easily. How often earnest discussion of these crucial problems recycles familiar formulae rather than thinking anew about the conditions of knowledge and awareness. We end up talking about "structure" and "cause" and "effect" and "identity" and "agent" and "action" and historical "periods" all over again: lamenting the losses and seeing no gains, but all the while taking for granted the very things that need attention, beginning with the fictionality of such things as, "the object," "the subject," and "the sign."

It is understandably trying to consider such profound challenges, and that is especially so in cultures such as those in North America which has invested so heavily in empiricist values. They should get over it. The Discursive Condition offers opportunities as well as foreclosures and those opportunities are obscured by denial just when new ideas about identity and politics are wanted most. Get over it. The Modern Condition superseded the medieval, and there is substantial evidence that modernity is now being superseded. Exploring these opportunities requires a willingness to move beyond the nostalgia that has for so long been evident in discussion of the "postmodern." It is time to stop flinging epithets (take only one example, Alain Badiou dismissing Jean-François Lyotard as "'modern' deconstructivist paraphernalia" (Hallward, p. 17) and to start considering the immense practical implications of the changes involved; changes for educational systems, for politics, for art, for economics, and for ecosystems.

The challenge to modernity may have reached critical mass in the twentieth century but it appeared well before it in mathematics and physics, in art and even social criticism. Non-Euclidean geometry appeared before the middle of the nineteenth century, as did the science leading to Maxwell's equations; novelists as different as Gustave Flaubert and Thomas Hardy represented the foundational threat to neutral time; mid-nineteenth-century painters, Manet and Cézanne in France, the Pre-Raphaelites in England, sought ways around Renaissance pictorial traditions. George Eliot wrote approvingly of a German denunciation of Western metaphysics from Parmenides to Kant for its separation of ideas from things. In fact, the entire nineteenth century was congratulated in 1924 by the surrealist André Breton for denouncing what he called "this ridiculous illusion of happiness and *understanding*" that Western rationalism had sponsored (Breton, pp. 152–153). A modernity already under challenge by 1850 obviously had roots in a rationalism older than an Enlightenment underway for less than 200 years.

By the turn of the twentieth century the critique of modernity was evident across a range of practice from physics to linguistics to philosophy to politics to art. The first decade alone began experimental departures whose results have by the twenty-first century moved even popular awareness well beyond

the comfort zones of traditional modernity. In addition to breaks in physics (Einstein, *Special Theory of Relativity*, 1905), in linguistics and epistemology (Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 1906–1911), there were other determining breaks with Renaissance traditions. Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) challenged representational conventions as did so much else in the visual art and architecture of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, running from installation art to cinema, from Dada and Surrealism to Abstract Expressionism; from Antonio Gaudí to Frank Gehry. During the first half of the twentieth century two world wars and various subsequent genocides challenged the efficacy of law almost to the point of normalizing such war. In philosophy at the turn of the twentieth century phenomenology undermined the distinction between subject and object that for centuries it had treated as fundamental. The development and division of various media, especially film, altered ideas about the nature and status of art. The Hubble telescope has lent aid to those who think the universe is composed largely of a dark matter we cannot see or know. In such conditions it is impossible not to unsettle the founding assumptions of Eurocentric modernity, including its obsession with power and knowledge, its constraint of language to primarily symbolic rather than poetic function, its categorical and dualistic modes of definition, its belief in the quantitative and objective, its irreducible individual subject, and above all its objectified world made possible by the common denominators of neutral time and space. Anxious response to such foundational challenge may be understandable but the questions such challenges raise call for action. What becomes of the social mechanisms and methodologies, the politics and the collective agency that were based upon the common denominator universe of modernity? Can traditional representational values be reformulated for survival in the Discursive Condition, or will continuing denial simply consign them to erasure?

The shift from objectivity and neutrality to discourse has practical implications and consequences. Among the most problematic is the continuing use of outdated even dysfunctional language to discuss public problems. For example, as recently as 2001 – nearly a century after the challenges to modernity had become impossible to ignore – it still was possible for a United States Senator, speaking from the floor of the Senate and on national and international television, to defend a bill that gave a massive tax cut to billionaires, and to justify it by claiming that it provides relief to “the individual” and “the family.” By waving these talismans he manages to ignore completely the systemic influences that initially motivated the bill and that will flow from it for years to come, to the disadvantage of most “individuals” and “families.” How does he get away with such simple-minded talk about complex social issues? Assuming for the moment that he speaks earnestly, if not with the best will in the world, he gets away with it because he speaks the language of a citizenry almost entirely unused to thinking in terms of the systemic basis of values, and thus unaware of the destructive inadequacy of such terms. Those untrained in thinking about systemic values will be condemned to function like the character in the nineteenth-century novel, who

always did things “the right way” because he knew no other. If modern ways are the “right” way, they have long since been put at risk.

That risk is not necessarily fatal. The Discursive Condition does *not* erase the deeply rooted culture of humanism; on the contrary, there are many ways in which the return to language is a reformation that takes us back to philological issues in much the same way that Northern humanism did at the beginning of the sixteenth century (Ermarth 1998, pp. 3–33; 1992, pp. 211–214). Most importantly, the Discursive Condition re-opens political options that the culture of modernity has increasingly suppressed by its search for unity, rationality, and non-contradiction. For example, it acknowledges and even features precisely the inescapability of systemic contradiction, the presence of unmediateable difference; it shifts emphasis from rational resolution to negotiated contradiction in ways that have profoundly political implications.

The kind of cultural study that would unfold the paradigmatic implications of the Discursive Condition has hardly been attempted in North America. Such an attempt would require an understanding of “culture” that goes beyond identity politics and engages with the Discursive Condition, beginning with questions about what a discourse is and how to describe it; it is difficult but not impossible. Students have already managed discursive analyses of such things as military boot camp, the decorum of men’s public toilets, gated communities. In academic circles familiar disciplinary approaches and methodologies might accept a certain suspension of disbelief so that workable new methods and combinations might be sought. Universities might give more resources than the current lip service to actual interdisciplinary work, without which the Discursive Condition is not even visible. Methodological innovation might breach the exclusionary knowledge silos that keep alive the mind of modernity even as its vital signs are plummeting. When the subject of what comes after modernity has been raised, the discussion has too often been narrow and trivializing rather than generous, with the results that there is little inkling in the public domain that there is something called “modernity” and that “postmodernity” is not a synonym for trivial.

Saussure’s achievement is to convert language into “discourse” – the model for *all* systems of meaning and value. Any code, whether verbal or not, functions differentially, in terms of negative definition not in terms of positivities. In the Discursive Condition then historical explanation takes its place as one system among others, not the system that contains all systems. Historical explanation has to justify itself in terms of the Discursive Condition, in other words, in terms of its semiological basis of consciousness and knowledge; most of all in terms of what historical enunciation says about the practice of constructing historical knowledge. In any case, its conditions entirely change such that historians – and we are all historians – cannot simply take up business as usual assuming identities and causalities as if time were still a neutral envelope, unproblematic and even “natural.” In the Discursive Condition it is no longer viable, outside of frankly fictional or science-fictional writing, to make grand claims about world historical processes because process

is conceived anew in the Discursive Condition as a semiological process, not an historical one. Like times, discourses are always plural; and all discourses – whether they are political systems, domestic systems, traffic systems, fashion systems, economic systems, institutional systems, family systems – are semiological systems and function as such. Together and irreducibly they constitute the Discursive Condition in which “the prodigious individual awareness” – situated by various accidents of birth or geography – enacts the possible enunciations that together make the *unprecedented and unrepeatable* poetry of a life (Nabokov, 1969, p. 76). These are the given and only conditions of any action or creativity in the Discursive Condition. Each *langue* I inhabit (verbal or not) gives me the means, should I choose to use it, to do something creative (or not) at every quotidian moment. The challenge is to foster new tools of thought appropriate to these conditions.

The beauty of Saussure’s theory, to return briefly to the preceding argument, lies in this gap it marks and preserves in usage between the rules and the specification, the potential and the enunciation, between the *langue* that is never spoken and never exhausted, and the enunciation (*parole*) that always uses only a fraction of the available potential. The system itself – the sets of rules by which it operates – are largely or completely implicit and exist only in a wholly disseminated state. “English” is all and only what native speakers say it is, not something extractable. The same is true of any semiological system; each depends on the shared and tacit knowledge of its users about what is and is not allowed by the rules. What might be the unspoken rules that everyone nevertheless knows operate in the board room at British Petroleum? Each enunciation – or usage, or specification of the systemic potential – requires the exercise of “known” codes even though that “knowledge” remains largely subliminal. Articulating the rules is difficult, especially for honest property owners and citizens accustomed to thinking in terms of “reality” and “facts” rather than in terms of operating systems. Even so, everyone can spot a misuse of the systemic potential – a mistake in “usage” whether in “English” or at the office, at home, in traffic, at the White House – testifies to the presence of these systems that silently govern. The trick for historians in the Discursive Condition is to articulate those rules, not only when it comes to verbal language or personal life but when it comes to historical explanation itself: to trace from particular enunciations the subliminal rules implied; to name them for Enron and Pentagon, just as Foucault did for Panopticon. The kind of systemic knowledge privileged by the Discursive Condition amounts to a kind of *collective* intelligence that operates well ahead of any logic of ideas, Cartesian or otherwise. Getting to grips with that knowledge, a fundamentally linguistic (differentially grounded) knowledge, remains a major challenge of our times. What better work for historians with their commitment to “reading” the artefacts of discursive systems than “reading” the systems themselves?

The linguistification of the human world is bad news for conventional historians – and most of us are conventional historians – and bad news for conventional historical explanation. Why? Because the Discursive Condition confines all identity, all process, all causality, all consciousness, to semiological systems,

and precludes the possibility of universal common denominators like neutral time and space that might otherwise make possible the mutually informative measurements of the Modern Condition. In the Discursive Condition the emphasis on enunciation keeps the focus on the present and whatever “past” exists does so only as a present function. Thus the Discursive Condition has radical implications for the possibility of “doing” history, personal or otherwise (see Chapters 4 and 5), and also for the definition of individuality and agency (see Chapters 3 and 6).

For example, instead of thinking of myself as an individual agent picking up signifying tools in a neutral space, Saussure and his heirs invite me to think of myself as a moving site of discursive specification, a subject position or, more accurately, a simultaneous plurality of subject positions because I inhabit a simultaneous plurality of semiotic systems. I am indistinguishably teacher, driver, friend, thinker, musician, colleague, parent, scholar, voter, and so on. Instead of thinking that language is only language and the world is “real,” I am invited to recognize that everything is language at every moment: a text, a readability, an opportunity for writing, for enunciation. In such ideas the actual (semiotic) complexity of my day begins to find an adequate intellectual model.

For the human sciences dedicated to quantitative measurement – for example, conventional History – to take seriously Saussure’s implications for practice would be a bit like volunteering to travel through a wormhole in space; you would lose not just your identity but your cell structure as a Truth Teller. In the Discursive Condition, neither historical explanation, nor realist art, nor representational politics can make any ultimate Truth claims, especially not ones based on “data,” instead they must take their places as systems of meaning and value among others, codes among many alternative codes, each with powers and limitations. This is *not at all* the same as considering all codes equally valid. Fortunately, the Discursive Condition does *not* reduce the Modern Condition to rubble, and does not require Heroic Construction of New Beliefs and Practices. It does require recognition that all beliefs and practices belong to discursive systems and are not free-standing or objectively verifiable; it does require new methods to accomplish that (Chapter 5 offers some methodological suggestions for historians).

The systemic basis of all knowledge and even of consciousness itself is an idea already familiar to a significant extent. But it is an idea that has been depreciated and suppressed by the objectifying habits and models of modernity. Each of us performs a continuous daily miracle juggling multiple systems of engagement just so we can communicate about the simplest things, stay on the functional side of the road, and generally keep out of harm and earn a living. It is not nothing. But the intellectual models appropriate to the Modern Condition tell us it is nothing. What is new in the Discursive Condition is not the existence of systems but the attention to them: the attention not just to content and information but instead to systemic values and to method, especially one’s own. “Understanding” these conditions is only the beginning, and in itself accomplishes little if it is not accompanied by experimentation with tools of thought more appropriate to the Discursive Condition.

Part II

Practical implications: some basics

3 Individuality and agency in the Discursive Condition

Identity is, above all, an accomplishment, a particular work, a particular act. Identity is not something separate from responsibility, but on the contrary, is its very expression.

(Václav Havel)

The Discursive Condition famously throws into crisis Foucault's "founding subject" of history, in other words the constitutive element of the modern perspective system in time. With that subject go many of the liberal values that Eurocentric societies have taken for granted for at least several centuries. For the sake of argument, say we accept that discursive systems (Saussure's semiological systems) lie at the basis of our knowledge, and thus that no universal common denominator exists to enforce neutrality. Several things follow that make conventional definitions and causal explanations seem increasingly parochial. First, the definition of "individuality" changes and with it the definition of agency. There is no such thing in the Discursive Condition as that free-floating monad known as "the" simply located individual, or Foucault's "founding subject" of history, or the "miserable treasure" of autonomous selfhood, or the Cartesian *cogito*. In the Discursive Condition individual usage is always, unavoidably, an enunciation that implies systemic values that pre-exist, enable, and limit what any individual can do within the system. Thus one can say that language speaks us, in the sense we are born into multiple discursive (semiological) systems, and that each language or discursive system enables and limits what we can do or think or say. For example, an English speaker has complex temporal inflections that are not available or even necessary in languages with other forms of inflection. Inflected languages have powers outside of sequence that English lacks. So before we skip the questions and go straight to the lament about the loss of habitual assumptions about identity, autonomy, agency, moral freedom, ethics, collective responsibility, etc., some clarity about the alternatives would be in order.

The fact, treated in Chapter 2, that language governs our choices ("speaks us") does not at all extinguish individuality, choice, and creativity. On the contrary, the moment of enunciation is precisely an ever-present opportunity

for choice and creativity; it allows for expression of individuality in ways more complex than anything allowed to the “founding subject” of history. To those still lingering in the Modern Condition it can be startling to lose that founding subject whose perspective is so familiar and so foundational in the Modern Condition. Fearing catastrophe, some have mounted now-familiar efforts to rescue that supposedly liberal subject. Some widely accepted discussions either denounce “postmodernism” as a degraded form of capitalism or, alternatively, praise it as a full expression of capitalism. Among ideologues of the Left and Right, careless denunciations have been familiar for decades. A particularly striking example is Lynne (Mrs. Dick) Cheney’s spectacular misconception concerning the definition of “postmodernism” during her time as head of the National Endowment for the Humanities in the U.S. Her postmodernism is “the notion that there is no such thing as truth. There’s only your version of events and my version and Charles’s version and Harry’s version, and the only one that prevails will be that of whoever is the most powerful.” (Digby, 7 Nov., “The Right Wing Relativists,” TomPaine.com). People like this really should get out more. The shift away from modernity has virtually nothing to do with combat between individual versions of truth or of the univocal “events” she mentions. Such an uncomprehending statement seems in hindsight ominously like a manifesto for right wing ideologues to come. Perhaps it is also an indicator that, had academics been more responsible and less ideological in their own approach to the challenges to modernity, they could have substantially reduced the public uptake of twisted definitions by ideologues at both ends of the political spectrum. They could have pointed out that the “relativism” Lynne Cheney worried about had been a concern since at least the seventeenth century or even the fifteenth and, as argued in Chapter 1, had been a staple of modernity for several centuries.

Re-defining individuality and agency for the Discursive Condition means coming to terms with the irreversibility of the shift from object to code, and considering new definitions that correspond better to experience in the twenty-first century than the definitions we have inherited from modernity. Many influential approaches to the problem have used modern tools of thought to deal with a postmodern problematic, with the result of suppressing what is most seminal and unique to the Discursive Condition. Particularly obstructive have been the dualistic terminologies underpinning modern definitions of subject and cause, such as the dualisms between symbolic and semiotic, paternal and maternal, reason and madness. Such either/or formulae hamper language’s capacity for *both/and*. They also foreclose on the possibility of considering difference without duality, which is a key to the discursive process. Lynne Cheney’s definition exemplifies the suppressive results of using the language of modernity to address the problems of discourse, in her case assuming the individual subject of modernity and its consensus apparatuses of neutral time and space “in” which Cheney’s individuals (you, her, Charles, and Harry) duke it out for power on the playing field. Such failures even in formulating the problem not only suppress viable options but also obscure

the potentiality of language as a site of liberation by dogmatically insisting on long-standing assumptions about the nature of knowledge. This chapter explores the opportunities for redefining individuality provided by the Saussurian characterization of language. The subjectivity appropriate to the Discursive Condition functions in a system split between finite practices on the one hand (*parole*) and unspeakable semiological systems on the other (*langue*) so the discursive subject enjoys more complexity and richness than anything in the Cartesian imaginary.

To begin it will be necessary to back up a bit and to consider the definition of terms such as “self” and even “society.” They had scarcely any of their present functions before the early 1700s and in English-speaking countries it was well into the 1800s before our current usages stabilized. Until 1800 or even later “self” is largely a negative word, signifying selfishness or worse and corresponding to its medieval and now-archaic signification rather than the one appropriate to modernity. When Shakespeare’s Polonius (not exactly a sound philosopher to begin with) counsels Laertes, “to thine own self be true,” modern readers have interpreted him to mean something positive, whereas Shakespeare probably gave the term “self” to Polonius in order to discredit it. Similar usages are found through the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century in the novels of Jane Austen. The modern “self” by contrast is defined by existential processes of development that can produce essential change of a kind not called for in a cosmos divinely ordered in its every detail and where everything has its “natural” place. To the indivisible Christian soul on its pilgrimage, “self” was a blocking influence, or as Jane Austen still puts it in *Emma*, “a threatening evil.” Well into the nineteenth century, at least in English narrative, the soul does battle with this negative “self” in novels of the Brontës and even the urbane Thackeray. That still-medieval “self” was an evil to be eradicated or contained, not valued and protected (Ermarth, 1997, “Narrative and Nature,” “Society as an Entity,” pp. 11–13, 116–167).

The positive meaning of the term “self” – the one taken for granted today and now generally assumed to be the “right” and only one – has flourished in Anglo-American cultures only since the mid-nineteenth century when the combined effects of religious history, the objectifying influence of science and of realism, and changing patterns of social and economic life finally brought popular ideas of identity and order into line with the neutralizing protocols of modernity discussed in Chapter 1. That profound mutation depended, in its turn, on a revolution in the meaning of the term “society.” In their current and positive meanings, “individual” and “self” are by definition social terms. “Self” has no dignity compared to God and has no place in the pilgrimages of early modernity; but “self” does develop dignity in comparison with other, equal people. This version of individuality, Foucault’s “founding subject of history,” is the singularity essential to (and created for) the consensus apparatuses that maintain those neutral media, time and space, “in” which alone the events of modern causality can happen. That self, its generic “human”

identity, is a constituent of a new idea of society as an entity and it belongs to late modernity and should not be reconstituted where it had never been formulated. As Foucault said decades ago, “man is only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, a new wrinkle in our knowledge, and . . . he will disappear again as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form” (Foucault, 1973, xxiii). That individual, and the species identification it made possible, belong to late modernity.

To reformulate this singular “self” or “subject” for the Discursive Condition – in other words as a differential function of discursive regimens – means to reject the singularity of what was, rather briefly, “the individual” conceived as the in-divisible entity of nineteenth- and twentieth-century social narrative and theory. That singularity remains but has an entirely different definition in the Discursive Condition which insures that subjectivity never operates in one language or discourse at a time, in some kind of impossibly controlled sequence, but instead operates simultaneously in several discursive systems at once, be they verbal languages or other semiotic systems (gender relations, fashion, politics). In these messy conditions, it makes less and less sense to consider subjectivity in terms of simple location at all. To move away from that would entail significant methodological changes in the human sciences that customarily study, count, track, or variously report on “the” individual and “the” family or group. And so the familiar questions arise about autonomy, freedom, and responsibility. “The subject” appears to be no longer the originator of language, but its creature. What independent or moral life can be expected, cry the morally outraged, of a subjectivity controlled by systems into which it is born and over which it has little control? What liberty of uniqueness is possible for a subjectivity thus positioned? If discourses pre-ordain subject positions, do they also pre-ordain what we once called individual history? What becomes of concepts like social justice and even “human rights” when their epistemological grounds are discredited and their founding subject distributed throughout the functions of systems?

Such complaints often have a frail grasp on the cultural changes involved. Thinking beyond that indivisible subject of modernity cannot be achieved by vocabulary shifts that change nothing else. Despite the apparent newness of such terms as “subject” or even “enunciator” their usages often merely re-invoke the irreducible founding subject of modernity. That imperial Subject, like the imperial History it founds through the medium of neutral time, exists to sustain the one-world hypothesis established by modernity: the idea that everything belongs to, and is measurable within, a single common denominator medium of measurement. The windowless monad of modern identity seems to be half-immortal, on the level with dryads at least. It keeps trying to float free from the systems it supposedly manipulates. In the Discursive Condition this will not do. That modern subject existed as the constituent of those important consensus apparatuses of modernity that are no longer assumed in the Discursive Condition for all kinds of economic and political reasons as well as scientific, technological, cultural ones. Moving away from that subject,

as Chapter 2 indicates, involves substantial change even to the idea of identity. In the era of climate change it is becoming more imaginable, even desirable, to recognize systemic differences on a large scale. Foucault has been there already.

Saussure's model for a new kind of meaning system – the one that operates differentially in the ways discussed in Chapter 2 – indicates two things about semiotic systems that bear on the problem of defining individuality and agency: first, that such systems are always potential, never fully explicit; and second, that explicit statements or speech acts (*paroles*) can push the limit of an available systemic potential even to the point of systemic mutation without ever exhausting it, at least not so long as that system or *langue* “lives,” i.e., remains capable of new usages. The crucial gap between systemic potential and any specific, always partial realization preserves systemic openness. This difference between potential and practice makes possible new practices so long as the system does not become “totalized” (Levi-Strauss's term) or fully realized and thus only a dead collection of tags incapable of new specification.

Political relevance and collective responsibility is thus not something to be chosen or not; it is unavoidable for the embedded subjectivity of discursive systems. The process of enunciation involves, by definition, a subject acting in the semiological systems of meaning and value invented, perpetuated, or revised by such actions over generations. The more experimental that subject's usage, the more potential it has to change Discursive Conditions, and that is the definition of creativity. Revitalizing usage is precisely what artists do and why their work contributes so directly to social health. In these contemporary conditions agency is not a singular event but a process, a happening, an event constituted by a new expression within several sets of systemic values. Václav Havel says something similar in his December 1997 speech to the combined Parliament and Senate of the Czech Republic when he speaks about the “identity” of a free citizen: it is “above all, an accomplishment, a particular work, a particular act,” the “very expression” of responsibility, not something independent of it. Personal identity in the Discursive Condition, then, involves individuality that has nothing to do with the kind of singularity imagined by Romantic individualism or with reductions of difference generally essential to modern science. On the contrary, *that* reduction is precisely what is wrong with the identity-producing political regimes, whether they are the “retrograde” chauvinist regimes based on “blood,” or the Marxist and capitalist systems “hypnotized” by economic indicators (Havel, 1998). Havel's conception dovetails with Saussure's implication that “identity” and “agency” appear not as discrete essentials but as the practices of a lifelong activity of specifying the available rule regimens (*langues*). To think of individuality as a unique and unrepeatable creation – the poetry of a life – emphasizes usage, enunciation, and thus the *writerly* qualities of actions by the discursive subject.

Because we operate in several discursive regimens simultaneously, code-multiplicity means that we no longer have only a subject-in-process, or even a subjectivity-in-process, but something more like subjectivity-in-processes.

In more Saussurian terms, identity can appear only as the sequence of specifications of the available rule regimens. I am not first a parent, then an author, later a consumer. I am all simultaneously, each interlaced with the other so that what I do as a parent influences what I do as a consumer and what I expect as a parent or consumer informs what I do as an author. This is not news to most people; but our modern tools of thought do not account for it. The interpretive and intellectual tools inherited from modernity exclude and even depreciate such messy and unpredictable interlacement and continue to encourage assertion of matter and motion models of process and continue to assert the existence of impossible unanimities.

Discussion of identity in the Discursive Condition, to be adequate, must accommodate its “palimpsestuous” conditions – to use the delicious term coined by the Scottish poet and scholar, Michael Alexander. Identity is not something essential and atomic, like the vestigial “soul” of early modernity; identity is sequence and palimpsest. Its singularity, beyond its somatic singularity, exists in the series of enunciations it performs in the course of a life, and only in that series. No essential “subject,” conceived as an abstract reduction of particulars – no *Me* (miserable treasure) – exists apart from that unprecedented and unrepeatable series. Marguerite Duras puts it this way in her novel, *The Lover*:

The story of my life doesn't exist. Does not exist. There's never any center to it. No path, no line. There are great spaces where you pretend there used to be someone, but it's not true, there was no one.

(Duras, p. 8)

The palimpsestuousness of the subject-in-processes derives from the multiplied Discursive Condition of each moment as each subject/enunciator specifies, perhaps half unaware, using the codes available to him or her in their particular circumstances. This subject-as-moving-specifier, along with any collective role it might have, cannot be encompassed by generalizations that flatten its palimpsestuousness and choke perception of its unique trajectory with “the weeds of statistics and waist-high generalizations” (Nabokov, 1969, Ch. 12). Instead, this discursive identity consists in the unique and unrepeatable sequence of complex enunciation: a form of materialization that resembles poetry more than anything resembling the singular founding subject of history.

This idea of a *distributed subjectivity*, far from being a loss or a lack, allows for and accounts for the actual complexity of conscious life more fully and precisely than the modern “individual subject” ever did. A complex, multi-laminated subjectivity actually seems a fairly common sense description of lived experience in our time: much more so than the abstract cogito or “miserable treasure” that are derivative absolutes inherited from centuries of Western philosophy and theology. It seems particularly pointless, even wrong, to impose that monadic idea of “the subject” upon a personal knowledge that is more random and radical than that traditional model allows.

When subjectivity is less like a static singularity and more like a moving nexus or intersection, every action is a choice, a commitment, an expression of agency however inadvertent or unaware. My sequence is like no other, and each moment in it is a point of empowerment or suppression as I specify my available potentials. Such a subjectivity is individual in its sequence, not in some irreducible core. Its uniqueness lies in its trajectory, impossible to anticipate, within which an unpredictable series of specifications are made from among the available languages. The volatility of discourse – the resonances of language, its power of poetic, associative linkage – provides precisely the varied opportunities for selective specification that constitute the unique and unrepeatable poetry of a life.

Personal agency assumes new and different kinds of importance in this environment of semiotic multiplicity. The Discursive Condition alters the idea of agency from something that is mainly instrumental to something more complex and possibly more powerful. Political activists used to talk about trying to make a difference, as if effective action must involve extraordinary intervention and thus probably mob action. But in the Discursive Condition it is impossible *not* to make a difference; “we are difference” as Foucault says (1972, p.131). So the main question is not, how do we make a difference, but more, do we make the difference we intend? What difference *is* that, exactly? Again, there is no question of choosing or not choosing collective action: all action in a linguistified universe is by definition collective. The very systems of potential in which any act is intelligible at all are themselves the collected results of centuries. So in my unique trajectory I nevertheless cannot escape the fact that each assertion of personal uniqueness is far more complex and multiply determined than what Cartesian philosophy once asserted, but at the same time more potentially creative because that personal uniqueness is not given, but constructed. I create as I go from day to day, specifying in particular ways the multiple, shared systems of potential available to me. From that aura of possibility, and with all my limitations upon me, I construct – you construct, he and she and they construct – the unique and unrepeatable poetry that is both individual and collectively grounded. It is not the basis for a Mission Statement; it is not a World Historical Vision of identity, action, and progress; it is not the kind of vision available in the infinite neutralities of modernity. It is smaller and humbler than that, less passive, more creative, possibly even more effective.

In approaching the problems of subjectivity and agency in the Discursive Condition, then, the important first step is methodological. The analogue of poetry as the model for a life is more than a careless analogy. The best quarries for analyzing discursive function are the arts; they are the most highly achieved, self-conscious examples of semiotic enunciation. Sadly, it is necessary – perhaps especially for English-speaking readers – to justify the introduction of something that resembles “aesthetic” analysis in discussion of larger political, historical, and philosophical issues. Just how art, which is the sustaining work of social renewal, has come to be put in this position

is part of the discussion in Chapter 6. My main interest here is to make explicit, even obvious, how highly achieved artistic work opens new powers in our collective discursive potentials, in our power to revise social codes, so that it becomes possible to renew and revise rather than merely to repeat the same old exclusions and emphases, the same, same old stories.

Actual experiment *with* discursive subjectivity has been largely in the hands of artists, that is, of people who on canvas or on stage address the format, the method, the way of going – even to the point of abandoning altogether the canvas or the stage. Theorists associated with discussion *of* discursive subjectivity do not generally approach actual changes in practice. (There are some notable exceptions in theorists, for example Hélène Cixous, Diane Elam, Luce Irigaray, Kathleen Stewart, who try to textualize the new constructions in question.) It cannot be said too often that the problems this book attempts to confront have been anticipated earlier by artists – anticipated sometimes by many decades. Heidegger's experiments with method calls attention in sophisticated and even readable ways to the power of method – the fact that the *How is the What* – but since the turn of the twentieth century most of the experiments with the linguistic element of subjectivity have come from literary writing. How many different writers – Virginia Woolf, André Breton, Vladimir Nabokov, Marguerite Duras – have constructed narratives where individual life is not a story, not a point of view, not a journey, not a line, and have explored instead the thought that individuality exists in sequences which have little to do with the cumulative forms of history. Since early in the twentieth century, Jarry and Kafka, Picasso and Braque, Dalí, and Buñuel, painters, architects, dramatists, musicians, novelists, and filmmakers have been exploring the practical implications of what we can now call a postmodern cultural critique. We find that critique in a range of international and interdisciplinary achievement by Borges, Ionesco, Joyce, Faulkner, the Surrealists and their many heirs, Nabokov and Robbe-Grillet, Duras and Hawkes, the nouveau roman, Kundera, Calvino, and Cortázar, Beckett, Tom Stoppard, and Barcelona's La Cubana, Kieslowski, Tarantino, and the Coen brothers, Schönberg, the Beatles, John Cage, Charles Jencks and Frank Gehry, and so on.

Given the extensive change, even revolution, in knowledge that has been involved in the shift away from the settled assumptions of modernity, literary texts have figured as quotation-quarries and exempla but insufficient attention has been paid to the sheer fact of literary language, its particular power to turn convention aside, to reform the act of attention, to ground and limit the very formulation that is prior to any discussion at all, philosophical or practical. In both verbal and non-verbal forms, languages are our tools of thought, the essential precursors of practice. If, as Saussure said a century ago, languages are above all systems, then literary texts are the most highly achieved specifications of those systems. This discussion seeks its confirmations, then, in the work of contemporary writers because they provide for contemporary readers a range beyond what is conventionally imaginable.

To take only one example, consider the bearing on subjectivity of the way great writers like Marcel Proust or Henry James experiment with the powers of language. Both emphasize the "associative volatility of language" as Malcolm Bowie so splendidly put it in describing Proust for a lecture audience in 1997. It is precisely Proust's ability to push his language to the point of catastrophe, of coherence lost, which teaches his readers its powers and limits. These threats are the very things that make Proust invigorating to read.

Something similar can be said of Henry James, the first author writing in English actually to situate subjectivity at the perilous margins where syntax fails. James, especially his magnificent late work, forces his readers to cruise that boundary. In such texts, it can be argued, subjectivity is most liberated precisely at the point of breakdown. This is not at all a psychoanalytic point; psychoanalysis is not required for a reader to recognize the necessary bond between risk and freedom. The threat of catastrophe to the system, far from being something to deflect or deny, is the *sine qua non* of creativity and renewal.

The difficulty and even violence of language in late novels like *The Golden Bowl* and *The Wings of the Dove* enact the psychic stress involved in powerful interpersonal transactions even on apparently mild occasions. On the portentous occasion in *The Wings of the Dove* when Milly Theale returns from an ominous appointment with her doctor at the end of "Book Fifth," we get nothing like a result; in fact we get the whole of "Book Sixth" before her problem returns into focus. Instead, we get masking luncheon conversation concerning American scenery and a silent friend's unasked question as to what news Milly has had from her doctor.

What *had* she had from him? It was indeed now working upward again that Milly would do well to know, though knowledge looked stiff in the light of Susie's glitter. It was therefore, on the whole, because Densher's young hostess was divided from it by so thin a partition that she continued to cling to the Rockies.

(James, p. 249)

As usual in James, there is no establishing anything like plot or character from this; the point is the way language operates, through uneasy referents and displaced concretia like the Rocky Mountains to produce the sense of torque and strain invisibly formulating a set of subjective relationships which hardly find anything like "accurate" material expression. This entirely kinetic subjective realm is rarely marked by symbols, emblems, or other objects; instead, it is simply carried by a language that accumulates but refuses to "come to the point." We are made to feel "the violence of language" (Lecercle) as a power that both represents and suppresses (also Foucault, "we must conceive discourse as a violence we do to things," 1972, p. 229). There is studiously no There there in this James; conversations take place that *don't* actually take place; complex descriptions seem to exfoliate from one site to

another as if to make a habitation of language itself. These linguistic pressures force the recognition that whatever of importance *is* there lies “in the in-between” – precisely what Cixous calls the site of writing (Cixous, p. 883).

Again, to take a final instance from this novel, this passage deals with another case of such writing.

... he felt her as diffusing, in wide warm waves, the spell of a general, a kind of beatific mildness. There was a deeper depth of it, doubtless, for some than for others; what he, at any rate, in particular knew of it was that he seemed to stand in it up to his neck. He moved about in it, and it made no splash; he floated, he noiselessly swam in it; and they were all together, for that matter, like fishes in a crystal pool. The effect of the place, the beauty of the scene, had probably much to do with it . . .

(James, p. 424)

A subjective reality is made material, even though no literal fishes or pools are involved. The thematic development of this metaphor involves many quite different iterations, involving multiple seas of loss, of love, of kindness and betrayal, and even the sea at Venice. We are well beyond epic simile here, as the various particular specifications gesture toward common but unspoken elements. A threat of catastrophe lies in the lack of conventional resolution, in the constant prizing open of expected closures. By keeping readers on that boundary, James keeps alive the threat that inspires creative, liberating performances and that asserts the indissoluble bond between subjectivity and language.

Those feats of language that great writers of literature achieve (as distinct from the many other kinds of writing) have been described powerfully by some interpreters as the necessary basis for social renewal: particularly in Julia Kristeva's briefs for the “semiotic” function of language, or in Hélène Cixous's injunctions in *The Laugh of the Medusa* about writing with the body and against The Law. These particular efforts, and many inspired by them, often remain in the ambit of psychoanalytic theory and confined by that convention. Kristeva's “subject-in-process” is only a partially successful (hyphenated) attempt to dislodge the fixed subject of history; even Cixous's much more radical “writing in the in-between” may be interpreted as invoking conventional parameters in order to defy them.

Such approaches have inspired new respect for catastrophe, but have not dealt with it as an interpretive problem. The associative volatility of language, if not restrained, could overcome its rational functions of producing meaning. What then for the subject positions that such language entails? What does associative volatility portend for “the subject”? Catastrophe would mean the end of sense, of sequence, of story, of self, possibly the end of control and continuance. This is the fear, explicit or not, reflected in the vehement and usually impressively ignorant journalistic attacks on what is taken to be postmodernism.

Literary usage is one kind of discursive regimen among the uncountable numbers of such regimens. There are many kinds of "writing," in other words enunciation or specification of discursive potentials. "Discourse" is the term for the semiological rule regimens that include non-verbal languages, that is, for differential systems with elements and rules, concerning everything from urban planning and fashion to the conduct of politics and war. "Writing" in these discursive systems of differential possibility takes place when the regimen is called on by particular enunciations, including particular acts, in one or several of these discourses. With the broad translation of "language" to mean all systems of meaning and value, everything becomes discourse in Saussure's terms. The important corollary of that is, as Cortázar said, that "everything is writing" (Cortázar, Ch. 73). Every gesture, thought process, or action is a systemic specification of, and thus "writing" within, at least one of the functionally infinite semiological systems.

The replacement of the consensus apparatuses of modernity with the "languages" of the Discursive Condition redefines the whole field in terms of which identity or action are conceivable. What vanishes with the modern subject into the Discursive Condition is the entire humanist apparatus of infinities, objectifiers, and common denominators upon which so much has depended. What appears instead is the broadly distributed power and possibility of writing and more writing. As Foucault announced early on, it is not only subjectivity that must be rethought, but also the nature of the sequence, the nature of the series (1972, p. 230). He renounced the all too-recognizable *philological* wrangle of philosophers and struck out into new territory where even history, even time, belong to the palimpsest of codes, or language: what Julio Cortázar calls "this dirty game of substitutions" speaking of language in his palimpsestuous novel, *Hopscotch* (Ch. 56). Given the Discursive Condition, then, we have the power to revise our acts of attention and even, if we push it as far as Proust or James (Ghandi or Rosa Parks), the power to revise the Discursive Condition itself: the power literally to change through usage the codes that constitute our possible worlds, to revise the Discursive Condition itself within we can specify, more or less originally, the terms of those languages or codes which constitute our possible worlds.

These opportunities, moreover are not at all at the end of some pilgrimage but instead ready-at-hand in the small, daily iterations or revisions of discursive potentials that constitute the real basis for radical change in the Discursive Condition. Often we engage in this "writing" unaware; to be fully conscious of it every moment would become the white noise that lies on the other side of silence. Yet the linguistic analogy works and is important because it keeps in view those keys to the Discursive Condition: the differential nature of meaning systems, and the difference between system (language) and specification (*parole*). The inscriptive nature of writing in such systems takes place well below the so-called "meta-narratives" which have been mentioned (Lyotard, 1984) as something to do with *The Postmodern Condition* but which are

neither *langue* nor *parole* and thus not really anything in discursive terms. Meta-narrative, with its gestures toward essence and explanatory narrative, is just another term that is radioactive with the assumptions of modernity and which thus only deflects thought away from the real problems and opportunities that the Discursive Condition entails.

While coining a term for this new subjectivity may be premature, something is needed to counter the gravitational pull of various identity substitutes (the subject, the individual, the enunciator, the self). Previously I coined the term “distributed subjectivity.” Another possibility that suggests itself is the term *anthematic subjectivity* because of its association with a digressive, interlaced figure. *Anthemion* is a Greek word meaning a floral pattern of particular complexity, although you will find nothing resembling it in the OED except its little cousin, “anthem.” (“Anthemion” was one of the titles Nabokov considered for his last long book, eventually entitled *Ada*.) Judged both from his own descriptions in *Ada* and also from the massive example of his late work, Nabokov’s “anthemion,” indicates an interlaced, flower-like design, something perhaps not unlike the medieval technique of interlacement, where themes or patterns arrive and depart from various posting places, recurring and recrossing without exact repetition, and yet providing a kind of open system of rhythmic iteration and patterning. The narratives that supplant history with the frequencies of thematic patterning call for acts of attention different from those required by the familiar historical narrative of modernity.

For the rest of this chapter I want to examine some examples of the distributed subjectivity in process. The best examples are in works of art, especially novels and films. There are, sadly, fewer good examples in English than in Romance languages. English becomes the international language of business at a terrible cost to Shakespeare’s powerful system. One of the best examples in English, however, is Vladimir Nabokov, whose *Lolita* is, as he said, “about” his love affair with the English language. (For those who still think *Lolita* advocates child molesting, please turn off your sets now.) Nabokovian anthemions are good places to view the postmodern subjectivity in process. Nabokov characteristically addresses the problems of time and agency by pitting one hapless historian or another against the exfoliating anthematic alternatives of his texts. History’s poor productions and mistaken meanings become embedded in his narrative in a larger context of emerging systems where “value” is linguistic in Saussure’s sense, and where one cannot be uneasy with terms like “joy.” Where the Plot of History once was, the unprecedented usage now is: and not just in terms of words, but in terms of the nature of sequence itself. Both words and sequences maintain the multi-level, discursive volatility that, from at least Shakespeare onward, has liberated English usage from its hidebound habits. That volatility is precisely what conventional historical narratives repress in order to maintain the essential consensus apparatus and its rationalizing, objectifying grammar of perspective. Within that objectifying grammar, the singular modern subject is born.

Within discursive volatility, on the other hand, *anthematic subjectivity* is born. Discursive sequences completely scramble what might have become a “history” of persons – their obscure objects of desire, their lasting identities and conventional lives, their explanations that are only well-dressed mistakes, especially their fatal attempts to recapture the past. Work by French *nouveau roman* writers or by writers of the Latin American boom or by Hawkes and Nabokov, honor the past at every step. At the same time, however, they pay no homage to historical values (mutually informative measurement between past and future, developmental process, stable perspective), and instead engage readers in continuous, digressive distractions from history in favor of imaginative, even magical sequences sustained by the language alone. Such narrative eclipses any attempt to reconstitute the explanatory causalities of history or its world of common measurement. Training readers in how to sustain these magic powers becomes the project of the book.

As an example of the dynamics of anthematic subjectivity in action I take this little set piece from *Ada or Ardis: A Family Chronicle* (Nabokov, 1969), a novel that engages its readers in the triumph of life over death, of *eros* over *thanatos* by putting readers in the anthematic subject position that is enacted here by Van Veen, who is interrupted during an assignation with the amorous Lucette by a telephone call from his secretary, Polly, who is typing his *Treatise on Time*. (To reveal its full polyphony it requires to be read aloud:)

At this point, as in a well-constructed play larded with comic relief, the brass campophone buzzed and not only did the radiators start to cluck but the uncapped soda water fizzed in sympathy.

Van (crossly): “I don’t understand the first word . . . What’s that? *L’adorée*? Wait a second” (to Lucette). “Please, stay where you are.” (Lucette whispers a French child-word with two “p”s.) “Okay” (pointing to the corridor). “Sorry, Polly. Well, is it *l’adorée*? No? Give me the context. Ah– *la durée*. *La durée* is not . . . sin on what? Synonymous with duration. Aha sorry again, I must stopper that orgiastic soda. Hold the line.” (Yells down the “cory door,” as they called the long second-floor passage at Ardis.) “Lucette, let it run over who cares!”

He poured himself another glass of brandy and for a ridiculous moment could not remember what the hell he had been – yes, the polliphone.

It had died, but buzzed as soon as he recradled the receiver, and Lucette knocked discreetly at the same time. “*La durée* . . . For goodness sake, come in without knocking . . . No, Polly, knocking does not concern you – it’s my little cousin. All right. *La durée* is not synonymous with duration, being saturated – yes, as in Saturday – with that particular philosopher’s thought. What’s wrong now? You don’t know if its *dorée* or *durée*? D. U. R. I thought you knew French. Oh, I see. So long.

(Nabokov, 1969, II, v; pp. 286–287)

This is not a representation of anything⁴; it is about nothing beyond being the prototypical polyphonic creation in which various lines cross each other at odd angles and where further amplification only increases complexity without resolution. With the simultaneous commencement of phone buzz, radiator cluck, soda fizz, and door knock, we have a sort of collage of coincidence. Rhymes between “cory door” and “second floor” link this occasion with another amorous moment, this time with the absent (yet somehow present) Ada at Ardis. “Synonymous” and “sin on” may be a good commentary on the whole notion that two different words can mean “the same” thing. “Saturation” and “Saturday” join musically what might be related conditions. The variations on English and French words for temporal persistence (*la durée*, “duration,” the “long” of “so long”) make a regular little rondo in themselves and allude to the variations on the theme of time both in Van’s treatise and also in Nabokov’s *Ada*. The echo between *la durée* and *l’adorée* is a typists’s mistake in the symbolic order but is a luminous conjunction in the Nabokovian play on the theme of time where time and love are the same. The whole situation is both classic domestic comedy and linguistic commentary. There could scarcely be a more literal competition between the symbolic and semiotic impulses than the interruption of Lucette’s whimper of bliss by the secretary typing a treatise. Besides, Lucette’s problem has always been that, unlike her sister Ada, she makes eros “mean” something and so always fails with Van because she turns sex into a symbolic project.

The entire book is a tissue of little moments like this one that act more like intersections than like stages along the way of plot. The language moves from detail to detail in a paratactic, not syntactic order with none of the mnemonic residues of historical explanation. The stock plot is no more than a vaudevillian echo; meanwhile an activity of alliteration radiates from one center after another. Adoration invokes duration, saturation calls up Saturday, the clatter of coincidence mimics the amorous conjunction sought so desperately by poor Lucette and makes more poignant still the exquisiteness of the life-affirming eros as we experience it everywhere in Nabokov’s style. The novel confirms his claim that the plot of great literature lies in the style and that readers should be construction workers, not consumers. The passage is a condensed case of rampant reflexiveness if not severe semiosis, yet it carries along various parallel meanings and plot capillaries in its semiological expeditions away from linear production. The semiotic vigor does not destroy the symbolic project, although it does slow it down a lot. Van Veen is a model of the anthematic subject at work, trying to keep in hand all the various systems working simultaneously. It is “action” of a kind that belongs to the interval, the gap, the creative in-between of discourse where the sequence does not sink into the history of ~~this~~ person, that object.

What is at stake is the nature of the sequence: is it historical or is it paratactic (i.e., anthematic)? Is it productive, or does it primarily accommodate the full associative volatility of discursive systems? This trade-off is the subject of Nabokov’s last little novella, *Transparent Things*, where the author

offers a particularly focused comparison between the two different kinds of sequence at stake between modernity and the Discursive Condition: the historical sequence and the anthematic sequence, and the different way each recognizes the past. Composed of twenty-six short (often one or two page) chapters, the novella is constructed from two basic elements. On the one hand, there is history and its founding subject; on the other hand, problems of anthematic subjectivity and its recognitions. In the historical dimension the more familiar obsessions of personal history belong to the loveable obsessive, Hugh (sometimes pronounced "You"), Person or, in Britain, sometimes "Parson." In the second, Discursive Condition where multiple systemic values express themselves in thematic frequencies, a mesmerizing narrator fixes the reader's attention on exfoliating problems of anthematic recognition as the variety of thematic elements grows and their patterns interlace, embedding "history" within a larger context of emerging systems. The work emphasizes precisely that "associative volatility of language" that we considered in Proust and James: the kind of volatility that conventional historical narratives repress.

The history of "You" Person is a recognizable modern story: of work, travel, love, sexual encounter, and of a touching if misguided search for consummation with an obscure object of desire. This conventional life is cut short by Person's attempt – fatally encouraged by psychiatrists – to recapture the past. The discursive element, by contrast, consists of continuous, digressive distractions from the history of Hugh Person and suggesting systems within systems of intelligible value, and providing an imaginative, even magical sequence of language and art running parallel to, and eclipsing the past that poor Person seeks to reconstitute. The putatively singular but recognizably predictable "individual" history of life, love, death is embedded in a much different kind of sequence that completely scrambles the historical values: a sequence marked by a narrative voice that wishes Person well, but that definitely counsels against the pursuit of the personal past, with its explanations and with its lasting identities. Training readers in how to sustain these powers of magic becomes the project of the book. The training process is not unique to this particular writer although he is among the best in English. Nabokov sustains us, just as John Hawkes said (others employing similar tactics include Borges, Buñuel, Calvino, Cortázar, Donoso, Duras, Garcia Marquez, Godard, Hawkes, Jost, Kieslowski, Kundera, Resnais, Robbe-Grillet, etc.). What is important in them all is the degree to which subjectivity is a property or dimension of a volatile sequence or series. I will indicate briefly how this works, although the effort to extract results from a poetic use of language is a bit like explaining a good joke.

The digressive discursive sequence begins in the short (two page) first chapter of *Transparent Things* where a narrative voice begins to explore the possibility suggested by the book's title: in particular, the necessity for practising new acts of attention that preserve new kinds of standing relative to the past. The narrator warns novices to avoid the blandishments of history:

When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object. Novices must learn to skim over matter if they want matter to stay at the exact level of the moment. Transparent things, through which the past shines!

Man made objects, or natural ones, inert in themselves but much used by careless life . . . are particularly difficult to keep in surface focus: novices fall through the surface humming happily to themselves, and are soon reveling with childish abandon in the story of this stone, of that heath. I shall explain. A thin veneer of immediate reality is spread over natural and artificial matter, and whoever wishes to remain in the now, with the now, on the now, should please not break its tension film. Otherwise the inexperienced miracle-worker will find himself no longer walking on water but descending upright among staring fish.

(Nabokov, Ch. 1)

Pursuing history actually destroys the past by sinking into it, as novices tend to do (the marine metaphor). Alternatively, by staying at the “exact level of the moment,” a discipline as miraculous as that of walking on water, the miracle worker allows the past to shine through “transparent things.” These “things” no longer function as they did in the objectifying grammars of modernity; “things” are not “objects” but instead, the occasions, the carriers, the sites where the act of attention is performed, where memory can inflect, and re-inflect again an imaginative awareness engaged in the process of creating the unique and unrepeatable poetry of a life. The discursive sequence privileges the details of life depreciated by the rationalizing agendas of modernity.

This text provides for readers a continuous experience of that “mysterious mental maneuver required to pass from one state of being to the next.” Conscious life is reborn every three seconds – about the time it takes to breathe out or breathe in – and each new state, while perhaps not much different from what came immediately before, nevertheless is not quite the same either. Being the creature of these complex specifications is a heady business, and certainly not to be viewed nostalgically as a loss. Instead this inflected sequence of *anthematic recognition* indicates the way experience retains value without lapsing into explanation. This discursive process is what replaces the modern subject and its history.

The subject of enunciation in discursive systems allows for the palimpsestuous multiplicity of personal identity. Such richness, at once psychic and linguistic, has always been present in narrative sequences but modernity’s emphasis on rationalizing pursuits suppresses that multiplicity – in personality, in discourse, in language – so as to favor its processes of rationalization. The discursive subject of enunciation simply includes aspects of personal experience and conduct that modernity excluded, and it insists on the need for constant alertness to the systemic value (and finitude) of all terms.

What is so terrible about that? It seems more than a little quixotic to resist what is already present as the result of multiple causalities over more than a

century. Nevertheless, the losses entailed by the Discursive Condition – of common denominators and of autonomous individuals – inspire resentful, even fearful resistance even as those very changes inspire cheerful experiment in the best postmodern novels. I will cite only this passage from a 1992 book entitled *The Ennobling of Democracy: The Challenge of the Postmodern Era* by Thomas Pangle approaching some of the political dimensions of the Discursive Condition (discussed below in Chapter 6). Here is Pangle on “postmodernism”:

Here, then, is our situation in a nutshell: we in the West find ourselves in possession of fantastically powerful technological and economic resources; these resources fuel a society that is deeply unsure of its moral purpose and foundations; as an accompaniment or consequence, this society has come to be increasingly penetrated and shaped by a new, highly problematic and skeptical (not to say nihilistic) cultural dispensation known as ‘postmodernism’.

(Pangle, p. 5)

He goes on to claim that new critical legal theory is guilty of “joining forces with the more radical branches of feminism” to devalue the “original intentions and principled reflections of the Founders” (he means the Founding Fathers of the U.S. Constitution) (Pangle, p. 75). Postmodernism, in short, is a disease, and it can be cured by recourse to Aristotle and by avoiding the likes of Lyotard whose politics require us to reject “reasoning” and philosophy in favor of paganism and femininity (ibid., p. 31).

This kind of thing appears in thousands of different forms: in the spectacle of an envious small fry like Kingsley Amis condescending to Vladimir Nabokov, an artist six times his size; or in the way the *London Times* and the *New York Times* condescend to feminism and postmodernism alike; it even appears in some putatively feminist literature as the claim that postmodernism is a male conspiracy to remove autonomous individuality from women just as they are about to grasp it. This argument claims to be “feminist” and holds out for women an ideal of success that involves grasping the same kind of individual power that belongs to the patriarchal styles of modernity. This seems to me questionable feminism, but even more to the point, questionable history. It is at least as likely that women are beginning to locate and exercise that power because it is no longer central to discourse; in other words, that the appearance of women as MPs and heads of state is a sign that those political offices are no longer central to power. In any case, what Mr. Pangle, Kingsley Amis, and the *New York Times* and *London Times* have in common is a vigorous resistance to the recasting of subjectivity that results from the postmodern critiques of essentialism, structuralism, and totalized systems.

Nabokov’s narrative language sets us on a course of perpetual digression. His plots contain blatant contradictions. He develops iterative patterns that have nothing at all to do with plot or character, and whose notable recurrences throw

attention away from plot and character and onto the texture of language, the process of memory, and above all the surprises that a pluralized world always holds in store. What seems ancillary momentarily becomes focal, and then it gives way in turn to something else apparently ancillary. Events continually elude us – those discoveries, consummations, deaths, and marriages that modern readers hanker for. Meanwhile delay turns into digression, and digression into an experience in its own right. The mysterious mental maneuver of imagination becomes primary, the history of climaxes irrelevant.

These multilevel sequences produce a fractured, *disunified* field where there are no common denominators in time and space, no mutually informative measurement, no gravity. At the same time the language requires a close-grained effort of imagination and concentration. The reward is laughter, not a product like “the point.” Once plot has been let out the door, the only “point” of the reading – to the extent that “points” are relevant – is the fun of taking little excursions, making surprise crossings, and adjusting consciousness to the way in which the local event is always shadowed by alternate patterns that amplify it and make it resonate mysteriously. Such acts of attention are immensely complex in the hands of a writer like Nabokov. In such a rich environment there is no question of getting someplace; you are already there. The act of attention remains primary. And that attention belongs to a formality of sustained interruption, one that continually calls attention to the *surpluses* of languages and of discursive systems. In Kristevan terms, such language emphasizes those powers of language that are “heterogeneous” to meaning, in other words, to the creative rather than the merely productive powers of language. The allowance of play, slack, experiment, and adventure is power worth having, alongside the power to produce results, meanings, statements, claims. Most of what goes on in a postmodern novel, *is* heterogeneous to meaning, like so much of what goes on in any person’s life. This refusal to have a “moral” in tow, and the insistence on attention to systemic operations, continually shows the erotic potential of language, which is to say its capacity for surprise. It is eros against thanatos: play and pliability against stasis and death.

The distributed or anthematic subjectivity has new political powers that have hardly been touched, much less developed. Granting that “thinking collectively has become extremely difficult,” (Dean, p. 196) solving the problem of collective action may not best be achieved by returning to and insisting on to the same old terms of political analysis that have lost their efficacy because of multiple causes including disappearance of the common denominator mediums that made such action possible. The question of collective effort cannot be addressed adequately by merely referring back to traditional and conventional ideas of class or Party or identity politics based exclusionary definitions of gender, race, nationality, ethnicity. Those recourses modernize and naturalize the issues and depart from the Discursive Conditions that increasingly call for attention. “The individual” and “the collectivity” belong to a modern, pre-discursive understanding of identity and agency and do

nothing to advance the possibility of new action; in fact, clinging to pre-discursive terms continually thwarts the possibility of new action by folding the act of attention back into its habitual conventions. You can't effectively criticize a system – capitalism for example – using the terms of that system. Adequate terms may remain to be discovered; just isolating and describing some discursive regimens such as, for example, City Council meetings, the U.N., or Enron would not be simple work. But action that does not acknowledge those discursive regimens only consigns itself to a Modern Condition increasingly ineffectual and attenuated.

The distributed or anthematic subject of the Discursive Condition is neither the divinely programmed cogitator of Descartes nor the empty Lacanian subject of desire, though it may be closer to the latter in its distance from the rationalizations of modernity. But any significant move beyond those rationalizations requires new methods, and the most seminal method so far, and one that has by no means been fully exploited, has been the transfer of Saussure's semiological theory from verbal languages to all systems of meaning and value, in other words, all discursive systems. The approach from Saussure at his most visionary offers an alternative to the radioactive terminologies of modernity which carry with them so many outworn notions of identity and project and which make it so difficult to say or do something new just at the point where new tools of thought are required. Forging such tools means rethinking the most basic assumptions about possible identities, methods, and projects.

4 Discursive times: phase, phrase, rhythm

Time is like a bug that just keeps on walking.

(La Maga)

Neutral, historical time is another casualty of the Discursive Condition. More than any other departure from modernity this one inspires backlash and fear of catastrophe, suggesting that perhaps Cortázar's character is right and "we invent time to keep from going crazy" (*Hopscotch*, Ch. 99). The threat of catastrophe may have a positive function, as in the associative volatility necessary for creative exercise (discussed in Chapter 3); but the Modern Condition constrains associative volatility in order to maintain the rationalization of time and consciousness that underwrites history and its projects. By contrast discursive time, like the time of relativity theory, is a dimension of events, not an envelope for them. This makes conventional history – its founding subject and emergent causalities – pretty hard to do in finite discursive times. Conventional history of any kind simply cannot account for the crowded presence in every frame of multitudes of unspoken, unspeakable, differential (semiological) systems of meaning and value: systems that we negotiate unthinkingly every day even though our tools of thought do not recognize them. Discursive time is the time of the sign, not the time of history. Such times, like the sequences that sustain them, are finite and periodic; they come to an end; they know nothing of the infinite horizons and heroic potentials of modernity.

So pervasive in Western culture is the assumption of the historical values associated with temporal neutrality, that the important questions are difficult to raise, even in work that putatively attempts to do so. The rationalizing conventions of modernity remain invisible precisely because they remain so functional in practice. Even in discussions dedicated to "time" the term "time" often is not significantly challenged; "time" is just, well, *time*. It is even possible to consider different *kinds* of time as J.T. Fraser and others do without significantly challenging the term "time." While a wide range of different temporalities may exist, that variety still permits the use of the word "time" as a common denominator, a basis for linkage between them that can always override differences. The mind slips, inevitably it seems and perhaps

not always uncreatively, into complicity with the discourse supposedly being analyzed. David Harvey's discussion of postmodernity and capitalism explicitly raises the problem of temporality, though he concentrates on the crises prompted by what he calls the "time-space compression" of modernity; but even here "time" becomes a weasel word, linked with "Becoming" even as he notes that "spatial and temporal practices are never neutral in social affairs" (Harvey, pp. 238–239). Since the mid-twentieth century it has been common to speak of the spatialization of time or the temporalization of space without in any way upsetting the sense that these media exist as a neutral condition of events and practices. Thousands of narratives in print and film have made this historical convention familiar to the point of obviousness. To those of us (this includes most Westerners) who operate in the tradition of humanism and its empiricist offspring, re-thinking the very existence of neutral time is, to put it mildly, counter-intuitive.

What the Discursive Condition disrupts is not "time" per se but the particular construction of temporality that makes time neutral. It is the *neutrality* of time in historical narratives, like the neutrality of space in the realistic paintings of Piero Della Francesca or Raphael, that characterizes the particularly modern (i.e., post-medieval) construction of temporality discussed in Chapter 1. Historical narratives deploy the same convention of single-point perspective that realist painters produce; they perform similar mediations and produce similarly neutral and infinite media.

The narrative act of recollection that exploits the possibilities of "Once upon a time" as indicated in Chapter 1 is far from simple. The mediations of historical explanation have the profoundest relevance to our social, political, and psychic life. Consider the famous opening of Chapter 29 of *Middlemarch* where the narrator locates newly-wed and none-too-happy Dorothea Brooke: "One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea – but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage?" The gesture simultaneously discloses a difference and mediates it, and it does so with a neutrality that is impossible for the participants in this, or perhaps in any actual marriage. Even the point-of-view vocabulary here invokes the terminology of perspective so important to the historical convention. Any passage chosen from this author, George Eliot, or Scott, or Trollope, or Tolstoy, or Stendhal, or even Flaubert and certainly most nineteenth-century novelists as well as a preponderance of twentieth-century ones would show in full orchestration the same mediate interest, the same satisfying slide between one perspective and another that constructs a single-point-perspective in time and that forms the substrate of conventional historical explanation. This time is historical time, and there is no other construction of time imaginable. It has been inscribed over and over again, novel after novel, since 1800.

This chapter describes the time of the sign, or more accurately, the time of the sign-system: a kind of temporality that belongs to the Discursive Condition and for which I coin the term *phrase time*: a discontinuous, at best *rhythmic*

or *periodic* time (see "Time as Rhythm," Ermarth, 1992, pp. 45–72). Finite, discursive time no longer constitutes a medium whose neutrality fosters comparison and communication across temporal and spatial distances; it no longer constitutes a common medium "in" which we can assume we all live in more or less mutual relevance. Discursive Time has only local definition. It is a dimension of events not a container for them; it is a unique and unrepeatable period. Such finite times have plenty of room for the past; but as several textual examples will show, this does mean major change in what is meant by "past" and how that past functions.

Alternative constructions of time adequate to the Discursive Condition are by now familiar because they have appeared in experimental novels and films for more than a century. The discontinuous sequences sponsored by electronic media have become naturalized for many (Poster, 1996). New temporalities are available in literary narratives written by some of the most original writers since World War II – most of them, sadly, not primarily writers of English. Writers like Borges and Garcia Marquez, Duras and Robbe-Grillet, Nabokov and Ondaatje, Böll and Calvino all undermine historical, neutral, homogeneous time in their narratives, or abolish it altogether. In such texts the inconvenient fact is that there is no common denominator between one time frame and another: no consensus, that is, on the fundamental terms for describing and operating in the world. In such universes, each arrangement has its own time, but there is no common time in which common objectives can be reached by means of common causalities. The crisis of historical conventions impacts the English-speaker's sense of narrative order in particularly radical ways because coherence in the English language is governed by sequence rather than inflection. It is committed to the causal "and then, and then" of modernity much more than do languages capable of indicating relationship without proximity. So it is not surprising that the most creative philosophical and artistic challenges to the sequential causalities of modernity tend to have taken place in Romance language, not Anglo-Saxon ones. And the sources of major change in the renovation of "time" are not limited to literature. Time has also disappeared as a universal constant in physics. Einstein said that he was unable to arrive at the Special Theory of Relativity "until at last I realized that time was suspect" (Clark, p. 84), by which he meant the neutral, common denominator time of modernity and of Newton.

The "Phase, phrase" time of my title characterizes this newly discursive kind of time by combining terms from the fields of physics and philosophy: "phase space" from chaos theory, and "phrases in dispute" from Jean-François Lyotard's book, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Here is how Lyotard explains what he means by the term "phrase":

As distinguished from a litigation, a differend ["différend"] would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments. One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy. However,

applying a single rule of judgment to both in order to settle their differend as though it were merely a litigation would wrong (at least) one of them (and both of them if neither side admits this rule).

(Lyotard, 1988, xi)

Now this problem would be familiar enough to the nineteenth century; in fact, George Eliot, who talks about the "conflict of valid claims," said it better. But the further extension is new because it denies the possibility of *any* mediating common denominator, especially the possibility of historical time. Here again is Lyotard:

A phrase "happens." How can it be linked onto? By its rule a genre of discourse supplies a set of possible phrases, each arising from some phrase regimen. Another genre of discourse supplies another set of other possible phrases. There is a differend between these two sets . . . because they are heterogeneous. (p.xii)

A phrase comes along. What will be its fate, to what end will it be subordinated, within what genre of discourse will it take its place? No phrase is the first . . . A phrase that comes along is put into play within a conflict between genres of discourse. This conflict is a differend. (p. 136; para. 184)

Politics . . . is the threat of the differend. It is not a genre, it is the multiplicity of genres, the diversity of ends, and par excellence the question of linkage . . . It is, if you will, the state of language, but it is not *a* language. Politics consists in the fact that language is not a language, but phrases.

(Lyotard, 1988, p. 138; para. 190)

A "phrase," in other words, is a sequence, or a state of language, or a "set" of some kind that "comes along." It distinctly does not come direct from some central station like "English" or "French" or "Indo-European," or "Economics" or "the structure of the family" or "conservatism" or "democracy" or "Maas-tricht"; it is a phrase that just "comes along." It is a phrase that can be switched onto any of the discursive tracks I just mentioned; it can be appropriated by any genre of discourse; but the phrase itself has no determinate structure and is thus always contested. A phrase comes along. What does it link onto? The striking identification between linguistic and political "reality" is a key feature of postmodern writing. But to such writers language is all and only the living expressions, the multiplicity of phrases, and not what is contained in some putative "structure" identified after the fact and given decent burial in a book; from this perspective, the grammar book is a coffin, and the dictionary is (as Cortázar said) a cemetery where perfectly good multivalent words are buried in single meanings. To conceive language as phrases and not as structure is, in these writers, to liberate from confinement certain powers of language that have languished during several centuries of rationalist hegemony. With

“phrases in dispute” Lyotard puts difference⁴ and not resolution, at the very basis of discourse.

Lyotard’s language, especially the important term “phrase,” contains an interesting echo of this rumination by André Breton in his first “Manifesto of Surrealism” (1924), about how surrealist awareness works (as distinct from the despised “realist” awareness):

One evening . . . I perceived . . . a rather strange phrase which came to me without any apparent relationship to the events in which, my consciousness agrees, I was then involved, a phrase which seemed to me insistent, a phrase, if I may be so bold, *which was knocking at the window*.
(Breton, p. 21)

This “phrase” was an image of a man intersected by a pane of glass, but such an insistent one that it had almost the property of a visual memory. It was a phrase that came to him from beyond the rational apparatuses of his ordinary consciousness, but insistently and apart from rational explanation. It reminds one of the almost uncanny “phrase” that in Lyotard’s formulation “just comes along.”

This summary of Lyotard re-emphasizes the fact that the Discursive Condition is a condition of perpetual difference: literally of “différance” in linguistic terms, but here especially difference in discursive terms. And there is no genre that “contains all genres” (Lyotard, 1988, p. 139; para. 192). Politics is the place or locus – the site – of the intractable given differences in need of linkage. There is no Original discourse, no privileged position from which to judge; there are only phrases in dispute. Quoting Lyotard one final time, “there wouldn’t be any space or time independent of a phrase” (*ibid.*, p. 76, para. 120). Instead, there is radical contingency, and phrases in dispute. It is above all the *neutrality* of historical time that is challenged, and thus the power provided by neutrality to take perspective and come to agreement, however provisionally, about common agendas.

So what happens to time when it is no longer the putatively neutral medium “in” which disputes occur, like some sort of metaphysical Ether? Although Lyotard does mention the problem of time, he does not pursue it. Is there a temporal dimension to Lyotard’s “phrase” and, if so, what does it look like? What kind of time is it, that is bonded to the phrase?

I will return to that question with some linguistic examples but first I want to seek an answer to the question, what kind of time is it, by considering the analogies between Lyotard’s *phrase* and the *phase space* of chaos theory. In this discussion I rely for my general understanding of chaos theory, non-linear equations, or magnetic pendulums on various current discussions, most – though not all – of them in print. What I bring, as the interpreter interested in language and discourse, is the perception of a similarity that suggests a common frame, yes, a common denominator between disciplinary formulations. My habitual humanism certainly reveals itself in this search for a

common denominator or mediating phrase. What chaos theory brings to my discussion is a generalizing instance: a description of physical processes that matches the semiological ones in Lyotard's description of the political and linguistic phrase.

Physical descriptions of chaotic processes suggest interesting resemblances with Lyotard's ungrounded phrases in dispute. If you take a rhythmic activity, like a ping-pong ball bounced by a mechanism at regular intervals, and if you interfere with the frequency of that bounce even slightly, something interesting happens. The regular bounce becomes syncopated and then the syncopated bounce becomes entirely irregular, which is to say, chaotic. A similar experiment can be run with a magnet pendulum. So long as it operates like a simple mechanical and Newtonian pendulum the system is what you'd expect from a pendulum: it is cyclic or periodic, producing regular, repetitive motion that can be predicted. But if you send an alternating current around the pendulum, the linear situation is disrupted; the pendulum's motion becomes so complex that it becomes unperiodic and impossible to predict. No matter what its behavior at any given moment, the pendulum could be doing anything the next minute, even swinging in a complete circle. In the words of one physicist, who performs these experiments before lecture theaters full of scandalized engineers: "Given knowledge of where the pendulum is and how it is moving at any time . . . you still cannot tell where it will be next" (Mook).

You might think that if you leave the chaotic system long enough that eventually it would begin to repeat its motion. But it never does. The physicist who ran this experiment let it run for days at home on a relatively noisy personal computer. It nearly drove his family out of the house – but it did not repeat. A computer-graphic record of the sequence shows no repetition. At any point in the sequence, some regularity can be described, but that regularity is limited to a phase of the process, and does not extend through the entire process. This limit is what I propose to call, *Phase time*. Regularities of one phase disappear and others begin, and with them a new phase in which preceding regularities are left behind and *do not recur*. This phase, both in time and in space, is finite. As such it provides no basis for any rationalizing and objectifying claims of the kind implied by conventional historical method with its ever-receding "future."

The classic situation in which these issues appear is in describing weather systems – and in fact experiments prompted by weather have been important in the development of chaos theory. Thinking about weather in fact provides a way to imagine the way in which chaotic systems materialize and disappear and also the role of chance in those changes, where the slightest change in initial conditions can lead to radically different sequences. Chance opens systems like periodic sequences to intervention, and to a change that, because it cannot be assimilated by the system (mediated in its given terms), entirely redefines the system, such that one does not repeat the initial system, or return to some "originary" state.

But that is not all. What may seem chaos from the perspective of any particular phase, or phrase, is really only a transient phase in the continuing creation of new orders. Within the so-called “chaotic” sequence sets of regularity exist that one physicist calls “transient intervals of order”; others go so far as to say that chaos is a phase of order, or that, to quote Hayles (1990, p. 9), chaos is “order’s precursor and partner.” Although there is no repetition, neither is there pure randomness. The pendulum spends more time in some regions than others and entirely avoids some regions altogether. By looking only at certain phases of the motion, periodicities become visible, but they are visible only in limited spaces and times: hence the physicist’s term *phase space*.

By revising that term for the temporal dimension of these sequences, we find that a new kind of time comes along, *phase time*. This time is not merely a chunk of historical, or Newtonian time, but something that cannot be described in terms of a unified field. The temporal dimension of chaotic processes is *the unpredictable period during which certain regularities or periodicities hold*. These periodicities – like discursive systems – may overlap, or intersect, or not, but in any case they remain quite distinct from one another. When (perhaps I should say Where) one *phase time* ends, another begins. Such time is located, something unthinkable in modernity, but quite familiar to the medieval chronicler who, writing the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* speaks (at least in one authoritative translation) of a date as “here” – a time as a site.

The implications of all this for the discourse of history and project are substantial. You can apply an explanatory grid to any part of the sequence, locating greater density of action here as opposed to there, but the extent of that application is limited. What holds here does not hold there, and will probably never hold again. There is no universally applicable grid, no common denominator medium to guarantee objectification. This poses a problem for the discourse of perspective and mediation that underlies historical thinking, humanism, and modern science. In the Discursive Condition even space and time are subject to phase definition. All explanatory grids and explanatory *phrases* – to reinvoké Lyotard’s term – work only for small phases of the process. The term *phase time*, then, describes *intervals with a common rhythmic element*. That rhythmic element, and therefore that time, is finite.

It may be, as Hayles claims, that “chaos theory does not renounce globalization” but thrusts like all science “toward universality” (Hayles, pp. 215–216); still, the shifts from level to level across differences in scale, especially when they involve temporal finitude and rhythmic elements that do not repeat in all cases, are features that do not seem generalize-able in any terms recognizable as global or universal in the scientific sense. Certainly in human affairs, particularly the sequences of verbal or other systems that operate like language, the loss of neutrality in time, the confinement of temporality to finite intervals with a common rhythmic element, makes universality a distant possibility if that. Even some management apparatus for shifting or translating from level to level seems not quite to answer the questions of value that such sequences raise.

To bring this excursion into chaos back to the problems of language and politics, and to unite my key terms from each, we can say that the linguistic equivalent of this *phase time*, is *phrase time*, something that, with the help of Lyotard and of chaos theory, we can define as: the *discursive period with a common rhythmic element*. Added to Lyotard's analysis, what this gives us is a definition of the finite *phrase time* as something that is simultaneously a linguistic and a temporal event. This new model of temporality takes the place of the venerable old one that we know so well, that so much depends upon, and that is, whether we like it or not, radically in question. As an alternative to historical recognition, this periodic time is a form of anthematic recognition corresponding to the anthematic subjectivity in process (Chapter 3) as it continually performs its defining enunciations.

Language not only defines the Discursive Condition it provides clues to how discursive regimens operate. So far I have used the work of philosophers and theorists rather than the work of artists. But it is precisely in art where we get access to and exercise with the new tools of thought appropriate to the Discursive Condition. Among the number of writers whose language works to reform time, Julio Cortázar and Vladimir Nabokov both understand fully what is at stake including how to laugh about it. Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (*Rayuela* 1963) invites readers of its 155 relatively short chapters to choose between two different *kinds* of reading: one, "normal" and one "hopscotch." "Normal" involves reading a largely conventional modern narrative going from page one to The End, an end which is not the last chapter numerically. In this reading the reader must only follow passively a familiar numerical sequence of chapters from 1 to "56 The End" for the passive reader. This leaves out the ninety-nine chapters "on the other side" of The End. The hopscotch version involves reading chapters in any chosen sequence in an infinitely alterable series: in some versions certain chapters might not even appear and others might appear more than once; the author provides novices with a suggested hopscotch series, starting with chapter 73-1-2-116 . . . ; but all such versions require active, self-conscious reader involvement. The very reading experience itself becomes a choice, even if only of the "normal" way.

The two readings suggested by Cortázar, one consecutive the other hopscotch, produce two different kinds of sequence and thus profound differences in the identity and status of events. Read straight through, nine or ten chapters deal with a single event, a meeting of a group of friends who loosely call themselves "The Club" and who, when they get together, listen to music, drink maté or vodka, and have philosophical discussions. In this first way of reading, the Club's meeting is a singular event in a simple location. Read "hopscotch," however, these chapters are widely separated, which means that the "event" becomes "events." This reverses the characteristic effect of narrative typical of the Modern Condition which finds hidden connection in what is widely dispersed; here what appears to be single and identifiable as "the same," becomes dispersed, multiplied, no longer one and the same. Read "hopscotch" the single meeting becomes pluralized meetings; a discrete and unique event

becomes an iterative, rhythmic element. Moreover, this way of reading involves constant recognition of the subjective and constructed nature of identities like “event” and “person” because “event” more obviously refers to events of consciousness. Whatever hopscotch series is chosen, so long as it is not the merely arithmetical series from 1 to 100, it splinters the identities ordinarily known as “character” and “plot,” transforming each into a multiple and multilevel arrangement. The author tells the modern reader they can “with a clean conscience” stop at The End, at the end of Chapter 56, and ignore the remaining ninety-nine chapters. There are many other differences between the two ways of reading; read straight through the transitions are sadder, more absolute, more haunted by a sense of loss, but read “hopscotch” the effect of continuing ebullience and brilliance remains constant as one departs and returns from increasingly familiar sites in a slow process of enrichment.

The point of this organizational enforcement is to avoid the perpetual transcendence of historical narrative and its dialectical tools of thought. Because historical thinking entails a perpetual transcendence of, one might even say flight from, the concrete, it therefore offers no assistance to those who must deal with material limitation, including – and *Hopscotch* highlights this – the ultimate material limitation of death. This fatal tendency of “history” to transcend whatever is concrete and particular has been variously noted among twentieth-century writers. This historicist weakness may be endemic to humanism, although it is worth noting that Étienne Gilson described an ahistorical medieval humanism which, prior to the Renaissance, amounted to in his words “a humanism of the present” as distinct from Erasmian humanism with its “passion for historical difference” (Gilson, pp. 35–36; my translations). In any case, the perpetual mediation of historical thinking – between aspect and depth, primary and secondary characteristics, inside and outside, public and private – requires a kind of estrangement from the present that entails dematerialization, abstraction, disembodiment. The rationalization of consciousness that supports the continuity of past and future, cause and project necessarily supports kinds of thinking that seek to *transcend* the present, concrete, arbitrarily and absolutely limited moment. Considered historically every present requires a future to complete or at least improve it, and consequently a dialectical method for getting there just as this same present has been produced dialectically by the past. By emphasizing what is linear, developmental, and mediate, historical thinking by definition involves transcendence of a kind that trivializes the specific detail and finite moment. In the mobile culture of historicism every moment *has* to be partial so that we can pursue development, so that we can seek a completion which, by definition and paradoxically, remains elusive but which has emblems along the way: more information, more clarity, more money, more prestige, more of the constituents of heaven.

This restless – and we can say “modern” – flight from material specificity and limitation takes place daily in a thousand practical ways and depends upon a dialectical habit imported by historicist culture from much older traditions.

In the effort to open the closed hierarchical models of medieval Europe, dialectical thinking has produced models whose horizons are in many ways the same: dualistic models that retain the same, teleological, and implicitly hierarchical motives which modern thought supposedly has sought to subvert. History, in other words, merely put dialectics on the horizontal in much the same way Nietzsche says Enlightenment philosophy merely readjusted theological habits:

Since Kant, transcendentalists of every kind have once more won the day – they have been emancipated from the theologians: what joy! Kant showed them a secret path by which they may, on their own initiative and with all scientific respectability, from now on follow their “heart’s desire” . . . “There is no knowledge: *consequently* - there is a God” . . . what a triumph for the ascetic ideal!

(Nietzsche, p. 156)

The dialectical propensity of modernity is a common target of postmodern novelists, especially as it seeps into the tropisms of daily living. Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* is one of the most explicit, especially on the way dialectics produces the birth of that invincible subjectivity which is the ultimate act of transcendence. About this daily dialectical birth, Cortázar’s Horacio Oliveira ruminates:

The invention of the soul by man is hinted at every time the feeling appears that the body is a parasite, something like a worm adhering to the ego . . .

I swallow my soup. Then in the midst of what I am reading, I think: “The soup is *in me*, I have it in this pouch which I will never see, my stomach.” I feel with two fingers and I touch the mass, the motion of the food there inside. And I am this, a bag with food inside of it.

Then the soul is born: “No, I am not that.”

Now that (let’s be honest for once)

Yes, I am that. With a very pretty means of escape for the use of the finicky: “I am *also that*.” Or just a step up “I am *in that*.”

(*Hopscotch*, Ch. 83)

The birth of the soul is the ultimate act of departure, of transcendence; and now this transcendental object has supported a whole cultural formation which has reached a point of fatigue. It has made the body porous, invisible, even non-existent. It is difficult to describe.

I mean something else, almost impossible to grasp that the “soul” [my me-not-my-finger-nails] is the soul of a body that does not exist. The soul

gave man a push in his corporeal evolution, perhaps, but it's tired of shoving and goes on ahead by itself. It barely takes two steps the soul breaks up oh because its real body does not exist and lets it fall down plop.

The poor thing goes back home, etc., but that's not what I After all.
(*Hopscotch*, Ch. 80)

At least Cortázar's Horacio knows his problem. "I can make a dialectical operation even out of soup," Oliveira thought" (Ch. 90). Clearly, to face the difficulty, we must stop rising above soup if we are permanently to change that transcendental power of dialectical thinking whose fruits – as we can see every time we hear of the annual defense budget – are radioactive.

What can be done then with pure understanding, with haughty reasoning reason? From the time of the Eleatics until today dialectical thought has had more than enough time to give us its fruits. We are eating them, they are delicious, they are seething with radioactivity.

(*Hopscotch*, Ch. 79)

This soul, born of transcendence, has become in postmodern writing a focus of especially intense revisionist thought and experiment, and with it goes the medium of history sustained by the "founding function" of the soul/subject (Foucault, 1972, p.12).

The humble birth of the soul is just one instance of the way that dialectics operates: masquerading as freedom by suppressing any current material definition in favor of a dematerialized, literally immaterial Elsewhere. For every stomach there is a transcendental ego; for every "here" and "now" there's a necessary "there" and "then." Ultimately there is a paradise elsewhere that sets in perpetual motion our search and suffering, our obsession with action. By estranging awareness from the presently embodied circumstance, especially from the embodiment of language, dialectics distracts attention from the only site where action is possible, and it produces a negative birth of identity (not-soup) that is not recognized as such. It makes all "actions" into hostage-taking. It is bent on production, not play: on getting there, on power, on strength as force, forging, making, doing, in short, on Heroics and implicitly on a classical system of beliefs in which truth always transcends one's grasp. Such "truth is necessary," Irigaray writes, "for those who are so distanced from their body that they have forgotten it" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 214).

As its opponents have long said, dialectical thinking is one of the most insidious of habits; in the West it has dominated narrative and language for centuries, has become inevitably related to time in the modern sense of neutral temporality, and has produced any number of rationalizations that seem to hold less and less water. It seems to thrive on repudiation. Dialectics has been partially or essentially repudiated by philosophers since Kant as "a symptom of decadence" (Nietzsche, p. 223), "a genuine philosophical embarrassment"

and “superfluous” (Heidegger, II: 6, p. 47), and a “logic of illusion” (Kant, p. 118). And yet, to use Cortázar’s words again, we still are “drowning” in “the falsest of freedoms, the Judaeo-Christian dialectic” (*Hopscotch*, Ch. 147), which remains alive and well in a thousand events of everyday language which posit “the” future.

Practically speaking – and this is what concerns post-historical novelists – living in historical time is to live in a medium still informed by the dialectical habit, which means to live with one’s immediate present effectively neutralized by the perpetual fiction of inaccessible alternative possibility. To the extent we are culturally, discursively, and habitually historians we always inhabit a *dematerialized present* where particular, practical, concrete, specific experience is something we can only anticipate or recollect. This convention even commits us to the paradoxical position of habitually striving to transcend our transcendence in order to arrive (ultimately) at reunion with real presence which is always posited There, never Here. Cortázar characterizes as no other novelist the monumental, paradoxical effort required for anyone to escape from these habits, and he understands fully their appeal. “Happy were those who lived and slept in history” including especially “certain communists in Buenos Aires and Paris, capable of the worst villainy but redeemable in their own minds by ‘the struggle.’” (*Hopscotch*, Ch. 90). This is not just a psychiatric issue, a matter of desire, but an issue of a modern condition where the same systems hold in science and politics as in psychic life.

This use of history as alibi is something Heidegger identified when he formulated his view of historical time as the mystification of individual finitude. Historical time, to use Heidegger’s terms, is “public time” or the time of “nobody” (Ermarth, “Narrator as Nobody,” 1983). But “nobody” never dies. Heidegger’s famously difficult language is nevertheless adequate to this famously difficult subject:

The “they” never dies because it *cannot* die; for death is in each case mine, and only in anticipatory resoluteness does it get authentically understood in an existential manner. Nevertheless, the “they,” which never dies and which misunderstands Being-towards-the-end, gives a characteristic interpretation to fleeing in the face of death. To the very end “it always has more time.” Here a way of “having time” in the sense that one can lose it makes itself known. “Right now, this! then that! And that is barely over, when . . .” How is “time” in its course to be touched even the least bit when a man who has been present-at-hand “in time” no longer exists? Time goes on, just as indeed it already “was” when a man “came into life.” The only time one knows is the public time which has been levelled off and which belongs to everyone – and that means, to nobody.

(Heidegger, p. 477)

To exist in historical (“inauthentic”) time is to exist as nobody and thence, Heidegger’s logic goes, to act like an immortal or at least like someone able

to pretend that one's finitude is not absolute¹ and that it can be mediated by various means: achieving fame or amassing a fortune, endowing a building or a person with one's name or some other measure to guarantee survival according to the logic of historical time. But the authentic future for every *Dasein* (being-in-the-world) necessarily involves the absolute end of that being. To suppress that knowledge of death is to cripple the power to live fully, joyously, on the highest terraces of being. Death, as Unamuno said, is the great economist.

Heidegger's most important perception for this argument is this: that the idea of temporal infinity in practice deflects our attention from the ultimate human necessity of facing death. "*Fleeing in the face of death*" is for Heidegger the very ground of historical thinking (what he calls inauthentic temporality) because it exists in order to cover up the fact that existential time ends and that end *is not mediated*. Dying itself is not the issue nor is it a specifically human event. But facing our necessity with recognition, living as mortals not angels, that is the specifically human challenge not only for Heideggerian *Dasein* but also for the better humored Cortázarian cronopios. Heidegger's (and Cortázar's) insistence on re-structuring philosophical discourse so as to include the fact of death reminds us of how far the conventions of historical thinking have made the subject of death practically taboo by its insistent transcendence. It is still difficult even to think about existence in a non-historical temporality where there is no "Yonder" to justify faith. In Marguerite Duras's more elegant and harrowing words:

People ought to be told such things. Ought to be taught that immortality is mortal, that it can die . . . It's while it's being lived that life is immortal, while it's still alive. Immortality is not a matter of more or less time, it's not really a question of immortality but of something else that remains unknown Look at the dead sands of the desert, the dead bodies of children: there's no path for immortality there, it must halt and seek another way.

(Duras, pp. 105–106)

How can non-historical temporality or even immortality be experienced, then, without being covered up with another, grander, more teleological model of temporality constructed as a means of evading death? These questions are exactly the ones that Cortázar addresses when he tests the discursive alternative to historical sequence. *Hopscotch* time *is* phrase time. The novel makes possible actual experience of the kind of time that is bonded to the phrase.

My second literary example shows how verbal sequences work in the Discursive Condition. The example is from a late novel by Vladimir Nabokov who, as much as anyone since Shakespeare, gives English speakers a new experience of the powers of their language. In this narrative language, the principles of *phrase time* operate precisely. They also operate with a complexity available only to poetic language. It cannot be said too often that

the poets and novelists not only have anticipated the critique of modernity, but have gone beyond its sometimes circular efforts to more positive experiments. Nabokov is one of the twentieth-century writers – possibly the best in English – who gives us an experience of language and time that particularizes these philosophical and mechanical abstractions. But the paratactic patterns evident in his writing are typical of many other writers who also encourage us with their alphabets of possibility.

Nabokov habitually develops multilevel thematic patterns in which various details recur in varying frequencies through the course of a narrative, creating vast, paratactic, digressive networks that have only the most arbitrary relation to each other, and that yet maintain a torque and a richness that are unparalleled. For example, in *Ada or Ardis: A Family Chronicle* there are literally hundreds of these themes playing in every sentence and paragraph of the novel, each reiterated in a different frequency. There are forty-eight reiterations of the word “green” and nineteen butterflies. There are iterations in different frequencies of lavenders and orchids, velvet and armloops, there are hammocks and honey, there are labyrinth mazes, circuses, incest, insects, time, paradise, death, handkerchiefs, picnics, fatal gunshots, balconies, stage sets, suicides, pencils, water, telephones, windows and rain, sandals and shoes. And as usual in Nabokov, there also are anagrams and alliterations blooming along every trail. There are dual and triple language arrangements where alternate semantic systems come into view, whether or not you understand the Russian or the French. To the tuned-in reader, these thematic tracteries accumulate resonance from the presence they suggest of alternative systems spinning along just outside the line of putative plot. In this realm immortal Van and Ada, along with the comprehending reader, enjoy their unexpected conjugations and remain precariously safe from those linear habits to which everyone else in the novel falls mortal victim. These thematic voices, like different colored frequencies, provide a patter and an exercise that are anything but “background.” It is enough to make one suspect that Nabokov wrote on 3 by 5 inch cards so he could shuffle them, thus interlacing his themes in a surrealist manner.

As a case in point I offer this brief passage from *Ada*. Taken “cold,” out of context, such a passage could seem just quirky because, taken cold, none of its poetry – its reader-specific values, its strings of anthematic iteration, its contextual resonance – is evident. Because the focus is precisely on the powers of language, not plot-and-character results, such language is difficult to excerpt meaningfully and it does not submit easily to translation. But taken “hot” – in context, in the complex swing of the text with its particular muster of the rhythms of attention – this passage provides us an occasion to see how each word is shadowed by alphabets of possibility: incipient puns, complex alliterations, and thematic voices or frequencies that literally construct temporal phrases and that at this late stage of the novel, are well-developed (for example, the balcony theme, the larvae theme, the desire theme). As such it is a new model for the fullest act of attention:

On another terrace, overlooking another fabled bay, Eberthella Brown, the local Shah's pet dancer (a naive little thing who thought "baptism of desire" meant something sexual), spilled her morning coffee upon noticing a six-inch-long caterpillar, with fox-furred segments, *qui rampait*, was tramping, along the balustrade and curled up in a swoon when picked up by Van – who for hours, after removing the beautiful animal to a bush, kept gloomily picking itchy bright hairs out of his fingertips with the girl's tweezers.

(Nabokov, 1969, p. 477)

Among the various erotic amplifications here the primary one is linguistic and discursive, as one frequency after another appears, each with its attending metaphors. The series of surprising right turns from the terrace is a variant of the important balcony theme in the novel along with its attending metaphors of perspective; the parenthesis for the naive on the subject of desire carries, and varies, the play theme and its metaphor of sexuality; the gorgeous caterpillar *qui rampait* brings across the balustrade the larvae theme and its metaphors of time; the itchy bright hairs echo the fur theme and metaphors of touch. On each detour we pick up more richness. The amusement here does not come from any trivial snicker. Reading is an experience of completion and departure, completion and departure, completion and departure, not in a simple linear series but in multidimensional and intensely specific sites of this kind. The common rhythmic elements that constitute the phrase times of the text, that is, of each of these thematic voices, exist as a kind of network of implicit patterns that exist outside the local description and that shadow and enrich it without ever declining into meaning of any more specific kind. We experience a power of language, not a relay of information and certainly not a representation of anything.

On a larger scale *Ada* is equally digressive; it utterly routs anyone still hoping for plot climaxes. It includes blatant plot contradictions; Van Veen both does and doesn't shoot himself; he arrives for a meeting by car and leaves by horse. At the crucial moments of plot recognition, there are long digressions that distract radically from any emphasis on character and action. As with other post-historical narratives, this one depends upon a *formality* of sustained interruption. The language typically digresses from the straight and narrow linear development, sentence after sentence, so that a reader on the trail of plot invariably, like a disappointed beagle, becomes "lost again." What seems ancillary momentarily becomes central before ceding centrality to something previously marginal. Events, discovery, consummation, death, marriage are postponed while delay turns digression into a formality in its own right. The mysterious mental maneuver of imagination becomes primary, history and resolution irrelevant. Narrative sections are demarcated mainly by the moments of digression, where one sequence literally turns, and turns into another with quite different thematic valence.

What this multilevel sequence produces is a fractured, disunified field, where there is no neutrality and, therefore, no possibility of mutually informative

measurement. At the same time, this always-digressing language requires readers to make a close-grained effort of imagination and concentration. The reward is laughter, not a result. Once plot has been let out the door, the only “point” of reading – to the extent that seeking a “point” is relevant – is the fun of taking little excursions and making surprise crossings. Reading is then a question of getting the rhythm, in one after another such description and, as one goes, balancing an increasingly rich sense of alternate states and modes. These acts of attention must be what Julio Cortázar meant when he coined that mantra for a new philosophy, “I swing, therefore I am” (Cortázar, Ch. 16).

These acts of attention, furthermore, can become immensely complex and amplified. *Phrase times* in Nabokov – that is, *intervals with a common rhythmic element* – do not occur one at a time, primly, in sequence, but several at once, riotously, in ways impossible to summarize or to predict. In the passage cited, the furred caterpillar is one of several dozen who put in appearances at intervals during the course of the novel without particular relation to plot events; the balustrade he tramps along belongs to a balcony that echoes at least three other balconies, each with its own digressive influence; the theme of erotic desire so important in the novel has various amplifications here including the caution that desire and satisfaction may be discovered in something other than sex, and might have something to do with the kind of surprise that the Nabokovian syntax always prepares for us. There are in addition several alliterative patterns at work here as well, each with an interesting variation, as for instance in “picking itchy bright hairs” and in the “s” and “e” sounds in “Shah’s pet dancer . . . something sexual” varied with the soft “i” in “spilled” coffee and “six-inch caterpillar, with fox-furred segments” or, finally, the musical variations on the letter “t” in the final phrase. Itemizing all this is like explaining a good joke. The point is that at every level of linguistic magnitude iterative elements occur so plentifully that the text requires us to keep in simultaneous awareness not one interval but a range of intervals, each with its common rhythmic element. Phrase times multiply, charging each moment with a complexity that multiplies its identity far beyond what can profitably be rationalized.

Details here do not act, as they do in historical sequences, as grounds for generalization but instead as points of transfer or relay; as switches capable of re-routing expectation in several directions at once. The moment crystallizes, and passes, and new ones come into view that are not predictably or causally related to the last. The richest act of attention is local, but always shadowed by alternate phrases that quite mysteriously materialize and disappear. For a reader, the alternation from one set to the next gives a rhythmic quality to the reading: a sort of heartbeat of the book that is really the rhythm of attention. In such a rich environment, there is no question of getting someplace, you are already there; it’s just a question of “being there,” to borrow a phrase from Jerzy Kosinski. The sequence differs with each reader, being dependent on what a particular individual has experienced before reading this text and what she or he notices and/or remembers during the reading.

As a model for historians, such exercises have a radical contingency about them that can be daunting because they are unprecedented in modernity where every discursive system is translatable because it exists with all other systems in the “same” world: a sameness guaranteed by the neutral media of time and space “in” which everything is assumed to exist. But if the media of time and space themselves are finite, then the critical common denominators are gone that once authorized so many fragile communications, so many proofs of non-contradiction between here and there, present and past, self and other, so many dialectical promises; in fact, even the organizing dualisms of modernity are challenged. The peril of untranslatability looms. Are there any global relationships to extend these local ones? Does chaos theory and its phrase time suggest the end of our powers to universalize or even generalize particulars as we do in formulating the laws of science and of social order?

A responsible summary of the arguments about whether or not chaos theory implies an escape from radical contingency can be found in Katherine Hayles’s *Chaos Bound* (1990), where she explores new ways of conceiving linkage between local and global (especially the fascinating discussion of chaos theory and fractal geometry, Ch. 8), and the idea (Ch. 6) of “strange attractors” or braids of trajectories that converge and diverge unpredictably, creating pattern without totalization. “Interminable pattern without any meaning” as Cortázar puts it (*Hopscotch*, Ch. 34). Such physical processes seem similar to what I’m describing in terms of narrative language: both are kinetic, patterned, and local. But to the extent that such terms claim to be science they retain that gravitational pull of global explanation that renders them modern, not postmodern, or in other words, incompatible with the narrative language experiments of the writers I invoke in this essay. Do strange attractors meet the condition of “paralogy” set by Lyotard (1984, p. 60), “a model of legitimation that has nothing to do with maximized performance” or with the continuous differentiable function characteristic of the “paradigm of knowledge and prediction” that is losing its preeminence in the Discursive Condition? Does this “paralogy,” or logic of the parallel, itself gesture beyond locality (Lyotard 1984, Hutcheon 1985 and 1988, Ermarth 1992, Žižek 2006)?

The main challenge for narrative in the Discursive Condition lies in its production of a temporality that is no longer neutral. Discursive times are finite. They are periodic. They come to an end and know nothing of the infinite horizons and heroic potentials of modernity. Chaos theory enables us at least momentarily to imagine at the level of macroscopic expression what it might mean to say that time is finite, and what tools of thought such a time calls for. Because we assume time to be neutral and infinite we have become accustomed to thinking that we can translate or generalize the laws and processes we observe locally. Humanism and historical explanation both have rested on the assumption that such translation is possible. The Discursive Condition, by emphasizing systemic not objectifying values, fosters the perception that such translation may not be possible or even desirable; that there is a profound need to re-conceive value, and to reforge the mental tools for dealing with

that change. The many artists mentioned here demonstrate what such reconceptualization might look like, and live like, but the experiment remains incomplete unless others also accept their opportunity for new enunciation and attempt their own methodological experiments. The loss of universal common denominators may be an opportunity to re-think and restore such common denominators in new terms; or it may be an immense opportunity to forswear totalitarian outcomes. In any case, the writers of postmodern narrative language continue to require readers to explore those new ways.

The momentariness, the perishability of such experience may be problematic for chronophiles, or for those dedicated to anticipation: all the poor souls who, in Nabokov's words, are habitually guilty of "'looking forward to a promotion or fearing a social blunder' as one unfortunate thinker puts it" (Nabokov, 1969, p. 585). Instead of rewarding anticipation these sequences provide surprise. Each description has momentary impact, but one that echoes and is amplified in ways impossible to chart, and different for each reader, and each reading. "Sudden ice, hurtling down the rainpipe; brokenhearted stalactite." Each appears, and dissolves, and becomes part of a thematic fund that echoes in different amplifications through hundreds of pages. This is a mental model quite far from the empiricism of John Locke, but valuable nonetheless. The time of one's tense-willed mind, the finite moment of poise and focus succeeded by another finite moment in a rhythm like heartbeats: *that* time does not transcend the text, and in the Discursive Condition everything is text, a readability requiring new methods of decipherment. There is no Elsewhere, no site of meaning and value that transcends the phrase-moment or guarantees particular linkage with other moments, other phrases. The complexities of the reading process constitute all there is for that duration of time and consciousness. A time is the time of enunciation, the time of the phrase, the time it takes to finish writing or reading whatever is your text. Then you start over on a new phrase time.

The trade off between neutral time and phrase time resembles the trade off between clock time and "event time" that Robert Levine posits in 1997 as typical of cultures, many of them traditional, that do not stick to clock time. He cites as examples Burundi, Mexico, India, Burma, Canadian Micmacs, and Sudanese Nuers among others (Levine, pp. 81–100). However event time is not phrase time because it does not necessarily depend on the semiological coherences particular to the Discursive Condition. Neutral time has been implicitly a feature of humanism since the days when Henry VIII was tutored by Erasmus at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and it is not the same thing as the clock time that came into general acceptance with the railroads in the nineteenth century and became synonymous with wealth production (time is money).

Phrase time, time as a dimension of events, is typical in one way or another of all narrative written for the Discursive Condition. Such narrative provides important models for historians looking for new methods: work by writers already mentioned (Duras and Robbe-Grillet, Böll and Borges, and their

peers). Their narratives operate a formality of sustained interruption, and by an emphasis on the semiotic *surpluses* of language and of linguistic systems. These call attention by analogy to the surpluses of all discursive structures that operate like language and, by extension, the surpluses of every “event” described in terms of conventional historical explanation. The narrative style makes unavoidable for readers the semiotic play of language and the correlative indeterminacy of its meanings. In Nabokov’s anagrams and alliterations, in the varying frequencies of multiple thematic voices, we sense not only the variety of possible arrangements, but also the power of those choices we make in choosing between one turning and another. If Nabokov’s *phrase times* are not in dispute in Lyotard’s sense, it is because nobody would think to press them for resolution. *Ada* encourages us to resign our interest in structure, center, origin, and end, and to choose a process of endless differentiation and play that is neither structured nor chaotic in any classical sense. Readers of such narrative remain constantly aware of the fact that perception is not passive; that each perception involves a choice of one course rather than others even if the choices are obscure. As such readers we must renounce our orchestra seats and scramble onto the stage: no longer a World Historical stage but instead multiple sets of open-ended processes where, at the very least, disciplined acts of attention are required.

Where does this leave us? *Phase/Phrase time* – the temporality that is rhythmic and finite – raises important and unnerving questions about judgment and value. The problem is: if we have only phrases in dispute – not only as a political metaphor but in the very medium of experience, in the very language of awareness; and if we have only alphabets of possibility and not the medium for causality that made sense of activities like planning or considering individual responsibility or moral consequences; then what enables us to choose one phrase over another?

For example, and again thinking of Bosnia, what separates the structure of fascist genocide from the structure of humanist progress? Does anything stand in the way of the hypothesis that, in Dostoevsky’s phrase, everything is permitted? *Is everything permitted?* It is a question born of humanism and history. But the questions are a problem. Who is it that “permits”? Without the universal medium in which to transcend the local question, the question remains local, bound to a finite situation; and that is the answer. The question is, do *you* permit it? Or perhaps, do you know that it has always been “permitted” in the sense that it has been done, and perhaps continues to be done regardless what you or I permit. In such a context, moral action may be required to be more circumspect, less flagrant, less dogmatic in its pursuit of its “truths”; but it is by no means extinct.

For habitual humanists the experience of discursive temporality is quite new in one sense, that it calls on new tools of thought instead of the ones familiar from modernity. Nevertheless the experience itself is quite familiar: how a growing multilevel awareness blocks the temporal mediations between here and there, now and then. Much of daily experience does not submit to the

rationalizations and common denominators that modernity bought at the cost of a certain level of abstraction and alienation. Writers who take the Discursive Condition for granted claim that it is time to stop preserving a modern convention that no longer adequately maps experience (did it ever?), and that depreciates powers of association and patterning that have little value in the Modern Condition, but that constitute intelligibility in the Discursive Condition. Times in *Ada* constitute a dimension of its language: one with the intricately revolving phrases of the text. Through this bonding of language and time we experience both the materiality of language and its vast mnemonic capacity. Language as a systemic potential is a form of social memory. In Nabokov's narrative language this is no abstraction. Each iteration of a thematic voice, subtly colored by the presence of past iterations, constitutes a mnemonic function inseparable from language and its artifices: a mnemonic function very different from the kind of helpless lucidity that belongs to our old friend, historical memory. Each reader has a unique capacity to convert these paratactic elements into specific constructive, directed acts of attention.

I return in conclusion to the idea that such complexity is available only to poetic language: that power of language that our instrumental usages suppress. This "poetic" has nothing to do with "aesthetics" in the sense the Enlightenment invented to contain art in a position marginal to reason. The return of this marginalized power is a point that has long since been made by feminist theorists. What is "heterogeneous to meaning" (in other words, most of what is going on in the Nabokov passage) is, according to Julia Kristeva, an essential disposition not only of language but also of culture; and continuing cultural renewal depends upon full deployment of the semiotic function of language and its ability to avoid determinism. The sheer erotic – in the sense of life-affirming – pleasure of such language supports the independent intelligence, the power to resist (Cixous, Kristeva, 1980 and 1981). Feminist theory has been especially effective in making visible these political valences of post-structuralism. And feminist theory has given currency to an idea already familiar to those who understand the importance of art: the idea that art is not information. While this idea may seem obvious it often remains unacknowledged in the way even art and literature are taught, discussed, reviewed, and consumed: unacknowledged in the narrowly instrumental usages of language that have been hijacked by political and sociological agendas. The writers discussed here do not discover the idea that art exceeds information; their originality lies in insisting upon it in the face of 300 years of enlightenment.

Neutral time, by which I mean Newtonian time, realist time, humanist time, historical time, maintains its neutrality by sacrificing what is idiosyncratic for what is common; we seek to resolve conflict by finding common denominators. In *phrase time*, difference is the sublime fact of life; far from being dispensable, difference constitutes the system as Saussure describes it. Instead of resolving conflict for the sake of completed transactions in common currencies, the text emphasizes the multiplying context and asks us to be suspicious of any

transaction or any process in which dispute is *not* maintained. Details are everything in *phrase time* because they constitute the irreducible differences on which the text depends; they are the fatal pebbles under the wheel of plot, the surprising spider in the shoe; they are the switching mechanisms that engender new acts of attention. That is why *phrase time*, unlike historical or Newtonian time, can never be a unified field, but only this *phrase time* and that *phrase time*, disputed and finite. Every project in *phrase time* is limited absolutely. Its time comes to an end, and it will not be repeated. There is less of prediction and more of improvisation, less displaced control and more precision. There is no deep structure or transcending meaning to rescue us from that finitude and from that engagement.

5 Method and the tools of thought

It is possible for historians to mislead a nation in respect of what it might regard as its historic mission.

(Herbert Butterfield)

History as we knew it was a lie, a deceit.

(Slavenka Drakulić)

Historical explanation, as it is now almost universally understood in the West, rests on the common denominator values that characterize modernity. Historians treat these values as if they were universally valid and rarely acknowledge them. At the same time, however, challenges to the possibility of any such universal common denominators has been developing across the range of practice for more than a century and cannot profitably be explained away or trivialized. These challenges pose a problem for historians that goes to the heart of their enterprise. And we are all historians in the sense that we assume the method and its associated ideas, and we rely on professional historians not to lead us down a methodological dead end. Assuming that historians can get past the trivializing definitions of the “postmodern” that plague discussion in the United States, ethical practice would involve at least some acknowledgment of the historicity of history: of the fact that history is one method among others, chosen for explicit purposes, and having particular associated ideas about identity, causality, time, and particular cultural functions. Some attempt might even be made to explore alternative methods of approaching “the past.” This chapter defines some key terms of such a discussion and addresses the question, often implied but rarely addressed directly, what alternative methods, if any, might be available to historians wanting to renew conventional historical writing for the Discursive Condition?

As a culture we are up to our eyebrows in assumptions that make the objectifying functions of history seem “natural” even though they are anything but. “Thinking” without them is virtually impossible, so even if all historians suddenly wanted to become anti-historians and even if that were desirable, it probably would be impossible. However, it is way past time for those historians who persist in applying the tools of thought proper to the Modern Condition,

to deal responsibly with the critique of modernity that privileges systems and poses so many challenges to conventional historical writing. That critique, along with a multitude of changes in science, technology, and philosophy as well as narrative and visual art, has increasingly made standard historical writing seem about as quaint an undertaking as painting realistic landscapes: laudable, appealing, reassuring no doubt, but relatively useless in terms of cultural renewal.

Given the foundational systemic multiplicity of the Discursive Condition, can it be ethical to continue as usual using a method that inscribes neutrality and objectivity at the root of perception? This question lies behind Herbert Butterfield's warning to colleagues half a century ago that the "gigantic optical illusion of history" not only influences our interpretation of "the past" (to the extent we can say what that is) but more potently masks the functions of those interpretations in the present. We "lavish vast areas of print on researches into some minute episode" and yet "come to our fundamental ideas in the most casual manner possible" and almost accidentally. For example, "it is astonishing to what an extent the historian has been Protestant, progressive, and Whig, and the very model of the 19th[sic] century gentleman" and to what an extent since about 1800 this historian has contributed to the development of European nationalism, even "romantic nationalism." Such methodological carelessness can even lead historians "to mislead a nation in respect of what it might regard as its historic mission" (Butterfield, 1963, pp. 5, 23–24 and 1969, p. 30). What are the cultural, political, social functions of such history?

But go a step further. What is the difference between this genteel history on the one hand and, on the other, history as self-protective lies about genocidal wars such as the kind described in Slavenka Drakulić's memoir of Croatia. (Drakulić, pp. 6–8). There is little possibility of comparing objective truth with lies when the objective (historical) truth *is* the "lie" and when (this is the main problem) *its fictionality and thus its cultural function is denied*. The field is littered with problems of "objectivity" down to the level of vocabulary. Consider, for example, how those very wars gave us the obscene phrase, "ethnic cleansing" which has been perpetuated and become standard ("objective"?) description. "Ethnic cleansing" is the phrase that was coined by the *perpetrators* of genocide as a euphemism for their crimes. Nevertheless, that phrase was preferred to "genocide" by the many journalists, hasty with their objectifications, who then perpetuated it. The euphemism has become standard. *Cleansing*? Do we hear what we are saying? Such suppressions have had fairly high profile effects in U.S. history. Was General George Custer really a hero? Not according to the Public Broadcasting System special on the Indian Wars in the American West. In fact, General Custer's defeat might have provided for many subsequent Americans some very different lessons about leadership than the ones now common, had an historian Edward S. Curtis refused to accede to his president's pressure to suppress what the historian knew to be the truth. Commissioned by Theodore Roosevelt to do a history

of the West including the most famous “Indian” war at Little Bighorn, Curtis in his private correspondence had no doubt that Custer stood by watching General Reno’s defeat without lifting a hand to help him, thus losing the fight that he could have won and insuring that Custer would be wiped out in the massacre at Little Bighorn. But Curtis left that material out of his book on Teddy Roosevelt’s advice. To deny the invention that goes into history is to deny its cultural function which is not so much to hold up a mirror to nature as to create and maintain the terms in which it is possible to see, and not see, the world.

One particularly intractable problem for the Discursive Condition is the difficulty it presents for the political problem of collective action as it has been conceived in terms of modernity. This is a difficulty often mentioned by those keen to denounce from the point of view of the Modern Condition, all alternatives to modernity. The moralist’s objections to the Discursive Condition (it rarely develops into explicit argument) is that the political and moral problems of interpersonal relationships are better resolved by the consensus apparatuses of modernity which guarantee “human” rights and values, those cornerstones of world peace. The weakness of this objection lies in the fact that modernity actually is rather neutral on the matter of mutual obligation; it can be satisfied rather easily by being postponed. Secure in “my” identity, free and clear of all discourse (after all, there are no limits to the medium of “history”), and secure “in” a time where “the” future always beckons, all I really have to do is track my capital and leave you to “the market” or “the Lord” or whatever mechanism I defer to as “objective.” Contest and negotiation are unnecessary and undesirable. The mechanism – whatever it is – will work, probably “in” “the” future, and whatever might appear to conflict with that putative objectivity can be dispatched into non-Being with the usual efficiency of totalitarian solutions. I can even ignore entirely the fact that “the individual” interest I rely on is a relatively recent apparition that was invented to serve the rationalizing agendas of modernity discussed in Chapter 1.

In the Discursive Condition, however, it is impossible *not* to act under collective obligation because discursive systems, the bases of all practice, have been collectively created, revised, and sustained. The “individual” specification of those available languages (the poetry of a life) can be original, or it can be conventional or it can be a bit of both; it can repeat conventional usage or attempt new usage. The one thing the individual contribution cannot be is detached from collective enterprise. Any “writing” in a shared language is only possible in the first place because that potential has been provided by others, most of them long dead; and such individual specifications confirm or extend the possibilities of that shared language which will survive them and infinite numbers of future specifications. Each specific usage potentially affects others either by adding the weight of repetition or by opening the possibility of new practice. Such local influences intersect and radiate unpredictably.

Even the term “ethics” has a changed meaning in the Discursive Condition. In its more conventional modern sense, ethics involves value-based prescriptive rules governing what we “should” do, as in, [you should] honor your father and mother, or [you/we should] fund public education to maintain the health of democracy, or [you/we should not] bilk shareholders. The Discursive Condition erases the authority of “should” by removing the habitual dualisms that ground it and thus any ideal imperatives that might be used to chasten practice and postpone engagement. In the condition of multiple discursive regimens familiar to everyone there is no ideal place or inclusive vantage point, but only practice and engagement, and any rules have limited not universal applicability. In this context, “ethics” takes on its other meaning of “code,” and code is precisely the unspeakable dimension of language as Saussure defines it. The rules that obliged a Chinese to bow down to his emperor nine times were code, just as “English” and “French” are codes and so are “Enron” and “Pentagon.” Code is the necessary basis for possible acts of enunciation in all languages not just verbal ones. Everything is language. Everything is writing. Rigid or flexible, simple or complex, code is the semantic system (or systems) that enables enunciation, and enunciation is essential to “meaning,” “consciousness,” or “thought” of any kind.

Where then are the foundations of moral values? Does this mean (to anticipate Chapter 6) that “everything is permitted”? That the code of Nazis is equivalent to the code of Mother Theresa? This question and ones like it have haunted and distorted discussion of the important issues involved in the departure from modernity. Let us say for purposes of argument, yes, that is precisely what it means. But in the Discursive Condition no value attaches to either of these systemic potentials because that is all they are, potentials. *Only enunciation adds value.* The potential that is present may, or may not, be activated. There is no common denominator for judging between the two codes as code; what can be judged are only enunciations. Of course nobody chooses Nazis over saints; but this “choosing” is a fraudulent sort of business if no enunciation or specification is involved. In what terms is one preferable to the other? There is no ideal riposte to National Socialism and to assume otherwise is to waive responsibility for one’s unavoidable engagement. “We’re against it, let others act” does not fly in the Discursive Condition. The alternative to one practice, and the codes implicit in it, is another, better practice. In Discursive Conditions ethical responsibility begins here; the rest, whatever its ideal, is just easy righteousness.

Discourse thus suits an “ethics” conceived in terms of “code” rather than one conceived in terms of ideals or “should” values. Saussure’s definition of codes and their differential function redefines ethical practice (responsible enunciation). Responsible enunciation never involves living up completely to the code, as if it were a “should” or a moral law. As Levi-Strauss observed, thanks in part to his reading of Saussure, the living, viable code is the perpetually *unfulfilled* one. Complete expression of a code – the specification of all its potentialities, the writing of all its possible sentences – produces

rigor but also *rigor mortis* as is the case with Latin, now useable only as precise tags but “dead” as a language. The more its potential is actualized, the less “play” a code can have and the less viable it becomes. In modernity the fullest realization of a potential structure was a desideratum; in Discursive Conditions full realization of a code’s potential is not desirable but, in fact, lethal.

What is desirable is adequate, creative enunciation. This amounts to a sea change in the conceptions of individual responsibility. It is not a small step. In a condition defined by the irreducible multiplicity of such semantic systems thought cannot linger long on an “ethics” of “good” or “should” because adequacy involves qualities of enunciation: such as degrees of originality, proportion, flexibility (play), complexity, completeness. These are values that, since the Enlightenment, have been segregated, especially from politics, in the marginal modern ghetto labeled “aesthetics” (a topic in Chapter 6).

The Discursive Condition requires new tools of thought, new kinds of attention. Even if the goal is to protect the conventional practices of historical explanation, simply to re-assert them without discussion would not accomplish that. “Discussion” does not mean taking for granted the very things that need proof – as is so often done in the usage of such terms as “time,” “individuality,” “history” and (my favorite) “postmodern relativism.” “Discussion” does mean starting over on the definition of what is at stake in postmodernity, especially in North America where current well-known but half-baked theories on that topic only obscure what is at stake. Discussion means questioning the unquestionable. It could be fun.

The challenges to history as a method have been current in one form or another for decades, but they have been muted in North America by chronic inhospitality to the critique of modernity. That seems a major opportunity lost. In responding adequately to these challenges, in fact, historians may discover a calling and a kind of engagement little dreamt of a century ago when staying neutral was the ethical standard. Historians might discover a postmodern calling and engagement arising from the effort to square our enlightened social and political assumptions with our actual cultural conditions. That seems to me the only way forward for anyone really interested in the renewal of Enlightenment assumptions that no longer get away with being simply “self-evident” but that may still be renewable for changed conditions. In the process of such awakening to real problems, it may be possible to address even the internal challenges to those “self evident” cultural assumptions about equality and democracy, and to control whatever in our own conduct most threatens their survival.

These methodological problems currently facing historians are hugely aggravated by significant problems of definition when it comes to such terms as “history” and “postmodern.” To stabilize those key definitions in this discussion some brief recapitulation will provide a basis for addressing the tough and intractable problem of imagining alternative methodologies for historical writing. This is not an academic problem because, in the full semiological sense, everyone who employs the historical convention is an historian,

and that would include practically everyone in Eurocentric societies, especially the English-speaking ones.

History is a method. This may seem obvious but I wager that its implications are not obvious. History's values, purpose, and entire definition is methodological. History is a method for producing neutrality as described in Chapter 1, and that commitment of historical writing has nothing to do with content. Its inscription of neutrality is methodological. The "how" of history is what history is mainly "about." This needs saying because as a culture we have depreciated the How as something to do with "art" conceived as something "aesthetic" and thus secondary to the grown-up business of the world: something only slightly better than "humanities" which means "miscellaneous," but something that nevertheless belongs in the margins of grown-up experience, after hours, on weekends. Meanwhile we have naturalized historical conventions to the point that the term "history" indicates nothing less than "objective reality": the sum total of has-happeneds that are somehow "out there" and "in" a time that is not only neutral but is an artefact of historical conventions in the first place. "History" has been speaking for 200 years and so effectively that "history" can even seem *synonymous with* "time."

By a circularity characteristic of this most original, complex, and abstract of cultural grammars, or, what Saussure called "semiological" systems, the objectification that is the chief *product* of historical conventions has become the chief *premise* of writing history. The neutral time of history, as well as the objectivity it permits, together have become the "natural" condition of thought to most citizens of Anglo-American societies who, like me, are habitual historians. But although we have naturalized it, there is nothing "natural" about history or its constructions of time and of identity. The neutral medium of historical time is not found but achieved, and achieved through a mechanism derived from a perspective technology described in Chapter 1 that predates modern historical writing by several centuries. History's seductive claim to objectivity is implicit in its method and thus already present by definition in every historical interpretation. Its claim to objectivity rests on history's construction of a neutral, common denominator medium, "historical time": an infinite neutrality which makes mutually informative measurement possible across widely separated cases. This neutral time is the product, not the condition, of historical writing.

At present the question arises, do historical methods as the nineteenth century naturalized them still suit our explanatory purposes? Do we want to continue achieving the neutrality and objectivity, the individuality and causality enabled by conventional historical method and its corollary constructions? Those questions can not even be asked so long as the methodological condition of history remains – and despite decades of theorized discussion it still remains – inexplicit and unacknowledged.

Fortunately or unfortunately for the continuing health of historical rationalization, its formal agreements are so abstract that to disagree would require foundational changes that the convention makes it almost impossible

to imagine after six centuries of cultural development. Hence the problem of speaking about the Discursive Condition using modern tools. Historical method encourages us to lose sight of its artificiality: see? the “real” world looks like this. But once naturalized in this way, the system rules perception, enabling some things and limiting others without ever appearing to do so. No critique of history or its ethics can gain traction once this key disposition of historical writing is lost to view, and lost it almost always is: lost, perhaps, in arm-wrestling over definitions of “meta-narrative” or “postmodern,” or of what is properly “women’s” or “cultural” or “ethical,” or “theorized” history.

Looked at more closely, there is not even a very secure agreement about what history is exactly. For example, the definition of history as the story of mankind’s past drawn from written records, with everything else being “pre-history” amount to a virtually ahistorical claim. According to this definition writings as different as Herodotus, Augustine, MacCaulay, and Manchu dynastic histories all can be aligned under one rubric as “history” with no fundamental allowance for cultural and methodological differences. The modern idea of “the past” did not even exist in England until the sixteenth century. Between Herodotus and MacCaulay there is little compatibility between what is meant in each by terms such as “history” or “event” or “mankind.” Herodotus does not assume a species-definition of “mankind” as Western societies have done since the late eighteenth century. His time is not the neutral medium of modern history. Even among various well-informed twentieth-century discussions of “time” (Chapter 1 cites examples from Derrida, Kristeva, Fraser, and Lyotard) you would never know that time-construction differs historically and culturally.

But time constructions do differ. Neither the ancients nor medieval chroniclers and poets assumed anything like our modern historical sense of time. As late as the eighteenth century the construction of temporality in various histories still invoked the typological motifs of medieval narrative as much as the motives we now understand as modern historical ones. Before that, and probably well into the eighteenth century, “history” was frankly a way of making a point, as Henry VIII and his humanist apologists knew when they created their historical rationale for the Anglican Church. Even in the early eighteenth century, narrative fiction that claimed to be “history” as for example in the satire of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, was closer to Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* than to Thomas MacCaulay, Charles Darwin, or Anthony Trollope. Defoe, the political satirist, counselor, and critic of modernity, would love to know that his *Crusoe* eventually became mistaken for a simple adventure tale for children. Narratives that actually observe historical conventions as we now understand them were not generally disseminated in English-speaking culture until the middle of the nineteenth century and in the United States not much even then because “the Americans” were working out similar issues mainly in political documents and conspicuously not in terms of social narrative.

Given the relative recentness of history as we know it, and given its long gestation as a function of modernity analogous to representation in other “languages” including the political and aesthetic, it would be desirable to avoid the mistake of projecting modern notions back into cultures where they had no role or “reality.” Foucault notes this concerning twentieth-century historians who project “the individual” back into the literature of the Greeks where it had no place.

Thinking anew about the value and alternatives to historical method would begin with recognition of the historicity of history and of its cultural roots: a recognition that positively requires cross-disciplinary effort. Clinging dogmatically to disciplinary practice and resisting the risks of genuinely interdisciplinary effort, justifies the suspicion that the whole point of maintaining knowledge silos in the first place is to prevent any challenge to the status quo – a sorry role for universities that had their origin in resistance to dogma. Of particular interest are the homologies between historical conventions and those in other fields of practice as diverse as cartography and the sonata form (Ermarth, 1983, pp. 116–120). While discipline is unquestionably necessary for depth of knowledge, it is not sufficient for making the kind of responsible comparisons that draw the full horizon in which history claims its prestige. Keeping a grip on that history of history – on the finite and located culture in which history is one relatively late manifestation – may help historians who are able to critique history to avoid slipping perpetually into “natural”ness and thus out of focus.

So history, to recapitulate part of Chapter 1, is achieved not found, and achieved as one of a family of cultural systems that also produced empirical science and philosophy, representational politics and art, even certain forms of music and mathematics, certain forms of education, and much else that now is second nature. “In” this time of history and project – this neutral time – we pursue our plans and develop our personalities, we compare forms and measure distances. (I make no apologies for this “we”; although using “we” is matter for a lecture in itself, its function here clearly and simply implicates all readers of this text.)

In the end history’s claim to being an ethical practice rests on its methodological accomplishments, and these accomplishments are worthy of the reverence we pay them, so long as we remember that they are based on acts of faith. Historical time is a fundamentally religious construction. It is unthinkable to propose simply abandoning such constructions; yet in an era when the possibility of neutrality has been challenged in so many different ways, it is equally unthinkable to dismiss the challenges and still to persist in using history as an objectifier without acknowledging its historicity. To ignore the challenges may be to consign this familiar and powerful methodology of historical explanation to the care of propagandists employed by think tanks who often operate quite far from the kind of knowledge and responsibility once considered requisite for using the convention of historical explanation.

If historians really want to identify new ways to use the past, a major step away from business as usual is required. If that step is too difficult, then by all means let us keep repeating ourselves on the principle that insistence rules the day. That will suit vested interests. But that will lead, as it has already led, to attenuation of the very values and systems – the capacity to keep the world in mind – that we claim to want to preserve. History is at stake; but what is at stake is more than history.

As previous chapters have indicated in particular ways, the Discursive Condition provides no medium to be objective *in*. Neutral time and neutral space are no more, and not because a few quirky Francophiles decided it by fiat but because things changed across the range of practice, in various fields, and within a fairly short era. It simply became more efficient and fruitful to configure time and space differently. So, to recall a few examples, around the turn of the twentieth century, visual artists (Picasso, Braque) no longer relied on the neutral space of representational art; novelists and playwrights (Dos Passos, Joyce, Jarry, Ionesco, Beckett) redefined temporal sequence; Einstein used the speed of light, not time, as the operational constant; phenomenology undermined the separation of subject and object; and cinema from Resnais to Tarantino has all but abandoned the automatic assumption of historical methods.

A step toward new methods requires finding new terms that are suitable to the Discursive Condition and that are not radioactive with the assumptions of modernity. To use a language is to invoke an entire discursive regimen and thus to be well on the way to replicating its dispositions, possibilities, and foreclosures. To use such terms as “relativism,” “dialogism,” “pluralism,” “perspective,” or “point of view” in connection with “postmodern” simply confuses the issues because such usage re-invokes modern tools for non-modern problems, and implies an identification between what is modern and what is not modern.

“Relativism” for example – something completely different from “relativity” – is precisely what grounds conventional historical method. “Relativism” invokes a nineteenth-century definition of social and philosophical problematics that remain entirely consistent with all the other objectifying grammars belonging to modernity’s culture of representation. History represents the triumph of relativism, including the triumphant suppression of the fact that the method of historical objectification, rationalization, and formal consensus is only one artifice among others. “Relativism” leads the mind to a common field where everything is “relative” to everything else at some level of generalization. Opponents are by definition relative to each other and cannot be understood otherwise; the definition of each requires the other; they share the mutuality of a common basis in which disagreement can be stated and perceived as such. Such are the capacious formal agreements of modernity. “Dialogism,” unless it indicates simultaneous monologues (the surrealist definition of dialogue), is just “relativism” in disguise: an invocation of exchange that by definition implies a meeting or intersection of “logics” or

systems of meaning and value. Two logics that cannot comprehend each other cannot participate in “dialogue” in the sense that Bakhtin and others have attempted to suggest. To speak of “postmodern relativism” is to conflate two entirely different things. If it is “relativism” it is modern and constitutive of a single all-encompassing system of value that is common to all. If it is “relativity” it is postmodern, or, discursive, and can only be “relative” in the modern sense within systems, not between systems.

Such terms imply the very universal common denominators that are necessary to make something relative to something else, or plurality comprehensible as such, or dialogue an actual communication, and in the Discursive Condition there are no such common denominators. Get over it. Of course such systems do co-exist, and of course local relationships can be established; but those relationships are contingent and temporary, without universal alibi and, as yet, without many if any rules for such relationship. Slavoj Žižek formulates these issues as follows:

Instead of imposing our notion of universality (universal human rights, etc.), universality – the shared space of understanding between different cultures – should be conceived of as an infinite task of translation, a constant reworking of one’s own particular position. Is it necessary to add that this notion of universality as the infinite work of translation has nothing whatsoever to do with those magic moments in which effective universality makes its violent appearance in the guise of a shattering ethico-political *act*? The actual universality is *not* the never-won neutral space of translation from one particular culture to another, but, rather, the violent experience of how, across the cultural divide, we share the same antagonism.

(Žižek, 2002, p. 66)

Exchange involves “reworking of *one’s own* particular position” and not a reworking of someone else’s. “Relativism” so called is really a disguised attempt to achieve a universalism in which the constant reworking of one’s position within the “never-won neutral space of translation” nevertheless is aimed at a goal of arriving at the same universalities (universal human rights, etc.) that from the beginning could not be imposed.

The term “pluralism” is equally problematic with its suggestion of an infinite systemic tolerance of the kind that modernity necessarily implies and that the Discursive Condition does not. Do you have an intractable conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, between Muslims and Christians, between generations, or genders, or Parties? Allow them both: that is “pluralism” and that is the solution of modernity – possibly also the solution of an underpopulated planet. That “allowance” implicitly re-asserts neutrality; the irrelevance of that gesture in the Discursive Condition has been repeatedly evident in the Middle East and Africa where the peacekeeping forces of the United Nations have so conspicuously failed in their response to genocide in

Sarajevo, Rwanda, Darfur, Jerusalem, Srebrenica. The blue-berets signify “neutrality” – the signature value of modernity – but in a situation where neutrality is not possible.

A similar case can be made for avoiding the term “perspective,” an inscription of modernity if ever there was one. A perspective is by definition and through long usage a constitutive element of a formal consensus: agreement not about this or that issue but a formal agreement (lack of disagreement) about the nature of the field where all views co-exist. We do not look too closely at the fact that such a field is the primary creation of that consensus apparatus in the first place. A perspective without a consensus is like a nationalist without a nation: it makes no sense outside of the regimen that gives it meaning and value. Your “perspective” and mine may differ but not so radically that we cannot “agree” that we belong to the “the same” world or any common rule regimen. If that dis-agreement happens we each would be like that single visual cone on a canvas diagrammed in Chapter 1: unable for lack of that second, intersecting visual cone, to objectify the world or to “identify” what is “the same” about it or within it. Lacking that consensus, we no longer have a “perspective,” we have a radical unmediateable gap of meaning, intention, value, system, object, everything. The shift involved from one to the other is not a “perspective” shift but a discursive shift.

Finding alternatives to historical method is easier said than done given the undertow provided by the method, its founding subjects, and its productive causalities. Quantitative and temporal distance markers seem almost to constitute the building blocks of mental life, certainly of intellectual life in universities where course material is organized historically, scholarly attention respectfully stops at chronological “period” boundaries and accepts the correlative subdivision of “knowledge” into ever-narrowing tracks. The divisions of knowledge in universities – the emphasis on “disciplines” and on categories of disciplines – is a modern system par excellence, a grammar of perspective institutionalized. Publishers, professional organizations, and libraries reinforce these tendencies and collude in the elision, even suppression of work that does not fit the existing categories of knowledge because it is undertaken in broader discursive horizons. Some “disciplinary” distinctions amount to little more than sorting subject matter within the ubiquitous historical method of explanation. Reproducing that method seems to have become an historian’s sacred duty, even though what modern History “finds” in its process of discovery are its own artefacts. Meanwhile the instruments of modernity entirely fail to register the “anthematic” crossings, inscriptions, interlacements, mysterious mental maneuvers of imagination performed in the Discursive Condition, and constitutive of life whether or not our intellectual models acknowledge them.

Conventional history’s unacknowledged exclusions are one of its chief liabilities as a method, as those who have been left out of history have noticed. There is no indication in history of what is suppressed or, more to the point, *that* anything is suppressed. Yet the selection is real, even radical, if unmarked.

For example, even the “history” of science, including discoveries leading to the Nobel Prize, has notoriously excluded from the story women whose work was essential to the Prize-winning discovery, whose contribution was suppressed, and credit for it given to men. Did the historians in question purposefully suppress evidence? Or did they never think to look because of culturally engrained prejudice? The point is, “history” suppresses what it cannot encompass for whatever reason of cultural or individual limitation, and thus the objectivity that it formally claims is unearned: an act of prior faith, not of discovery. Several nineteenth-century writers recognized the suppressive power of history and provided dramatic evidence of it, for example, Flaubert in *Madame Bovary*, Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*, or Hardy in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (Ermarth, 1982, pp. 1–18). But those recognitions are exceptional and provided by artists who could see and show the limits of the very historical conventions they were using.

Methodological change in historical writing requires removing from the historian's field of possibility the ideas of neutral time and the objectifications, rationalizations, enforced agreements, identities and causalities enabled by the consensus apparatus of neutral time. If the Discursive Condition does present foundational problems to modernity and its history, and if Einstein and Saussure are right, that all we can really measure, even in physical nature, must include the terms and conditions of our measurement, then what qualifies as “knowledge” is method: method foremost and first of all. Artists understand this which is one reason why artists have so often been at the leading edge of cultural change.

Artists have addressed the problem of systemic multiplicity without common denominators for nearly a century and in ways that provide indicators for historians looking for alternative methods. Even though it is officially difficult or impossible to imagine it, common sense indicates that some things do remain outside the rationalizations of history. Despite the immense gravitational pull of the historian's method-produced neutrality, every once in a while you can, as Cortázar says, have the courage to stick your hand outside of it and reach for something else.

What we call reality, the true reality . . . is not something that is going to happen, a goal, the last step, the end of an evolution. No, it's something that's already here, in us. You can feel it, all you need is the courage to stick your hand into the darkness.

(*Hopscotch*, Ch. 99, pp. 445–446)

On “the other side” of the immediate systems of modern rationalization can be found something kinder to the present and something kinder to the systemic multiplicity in which we actually find ourselves every day and every minute. Systemic multiplicity cannot profitably be ignored when it governs invisibly so much of what later turns up as rationalized (intelligible, i.e., historical) “events.”

How this systemic multiplicity might be lived is explored by many writers but particular those who push language such as Virginia Woolf, Julio Cortázar, Vladimir Nabokov, Jorge Luis Borges, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Heinrich Böll. Given the difficulty of thinking outside of historical conventions about consciousness, sequence, or for that matter about anything at all, such experiments justify study. As the passage just quoted from Cortázar asserts, whatever reality there is on “the other side” of any immediate givens, it is something that already exists; “it’s something that’s already here” and is not at all a property of some future. In fact, the road to the future, Nabokov recommends, is something one should get off of as soon as possible. No more of “forward” (to use an overused word), especially no more of “moving the process forward” from “this point in time.” What lies on the far side of now is not the future but just another now. “The past” is not a place, and neither is “the future.” The future that by definition guarantees the whole historical system never arrives, also by definition; in fact it *must* never arrive. For the subject caught in the historical system, even a single step to an other side seems as impossible as the step not taken at the end of Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita*.

Borges’s stories provide an almost magical approach to reconceiving time as a multidimensional web of plural realities. For example, “The Garden of the Forking Paths” outlines a mortal competition: on the one hand, the time of history and project and its irreducible individual subject; and, on the other hand, a new kind of time as an “invisible labyrinth” in a text where rhythm and multivalence prevail. The central figure, a Chinese assassin working for German intelligence during World War II, holds the conventional conception of time. The alternative conception of time is the one created in a novel by one of his illustrious ancestors. It is a conception of

... an infinite series of times, in a dizzily growing, ever spreading network of diverging, converging and parallel times. This web of time – the strands of which approach one another, bifurcate, intersect or ignore each other through the centuries – embraces every possibility. We do not exist in most of them.

This conception of time makes pointless the assassin’s errand, along with the entire nationalist and militarist logic that supports such a course. Even the assassin momentarily senses the rhythmic pulse of invisible worlds that surround him and in which his projects are merely some possibilities among the myriad of possibilities, and (as we are invited to see it) an evil one at that, given the political realities of his particular project. At the moment he prepares to kill his target this “necessity” pales into choice: The assassin’s report continues:

Once again I sensed the pullulation of which I have already spoken. It seemed to me that the dew-damp garden surrounding the house was

infinitely saturated with invisible people. All . . . secretive, busy and multiform in other dimensions of time . . .

But the assassin is not up to meeting these challenges to his singular and goal-specific agenda. Much easier just to carry on with the “necessity” of his mission. The other world may surround him always, but he falls back on his single-minded belief in “progress” – grotesque in the keeping of a Nazi assassin (Borges, pp. 100–101). The productive narrative that focuses every consideration on a future outcome – something that might describe the historical imagination – is precisely what constitutes the Imaginary of the assassin. He knows no other possibilities.

In moving beyond historical conventions the rub lies not so much in developing new methods, which are already available, but in accepting the need for them. So it is necessary to mention the “p” word. What is the *purpose* of writing history? To contribute to a scientific or quasi-scientific representation of objective reality? To elicit from “the” past lessons for “the” present and future (and you’ll show me where that has worked)? To unearth “facts”? To confirm that the world is one? To astonish experts? To guide a nation? To do justice to the complexity of experience? To mark the invisible systems influencing practice? To seek the differential relationships that constitute semantic systems? What is the belief, the fictive ideal, for which one writes in the first place?

Questions of purpose can be awkward questions for modern historians of any kind, the professional ones and the merely habitual ones, because such questions restore the problem of qualitative value. A weakness of the modern historical convention is that it tends, as I have said elsewhere, to “depreciate questions of qualitative value, and even to produce a kind of rationalist disorientation about such questions” (Ermarth, 1992, p. 36). Traditional historical method allows the historian to objectify agendas and purposes that may be merely reflexes of conventional historical method (moving the process forward, valorizing development and/or growth, “whig” politics), silently transferred (projected) onto History itself. History then becomes authoritative, as Kingsley Amis has it in *Lucky Jim*, when the (stentorian) History Department chairman answers the phone, “History speaking.”

The Discursive Condition calls for new purposes, new purposes require new methods, and new methods can be found in all kinds of unlikely sources, often in the work of artists who usually are ahead of the curve. For example, when Charles Darwin was considering what method to use in approaching his increasingly radical thinking about biological species, he did not find the keys he sought in the work of other biologists but instead in the work of novelists (Walter Scott) and geologists (Sir Charles Lyell) who were experimenting with a new and, for him, more congenial method than that of natural history as usual (Beer). A purpose of modern historical method – the code which allows us to neutralize time and thus objectify the world – is to describe the abstract, emergent forms and causalities that operate invisibly in particulars,

rationalizing what otherwise might look random or chaotic if recorded, say, by a giant camera. The purpose of this consensus apparatus is to “save the essences” (Chapter 1, and Ermarth, 1998, pp. 16–24). Traditional historical writing selects to produce; that is its purpose. Whatever does not serve the emergent forms of historical investigation and the idea of neutral time they justify, is discarded as inessential. The whale looks like a fish but the abstract history of species says otherwise. The walnut may look like a brain and coral may look like a bush but such “surface” resemblances are secondary to the “deep” structures that identify them and for which they are the (disposable) evidence. Whether the process of empirical rationalization is historical or scientific it treats particulars as evidence or “clues,” in other words, as minor material manifestations of larger more abstract principles and laws; the particulars are discardable once they have yielded their generalizations.

If the historian’s purpose is to achieve these results the existing methods are adequate. There is no point in looking for new methods to accomplish what history already does perfectly well. Turning to postmodern methodologies only makes sense if the historian has a new purpose. Purpose in the Discursive Condition cannot be fobbed off on ideal mechanisms; purpose always involves possible acts of enunciation according to the powers and limits of a semantic system or set of semantic systems. Occasionally with a Shakespeare you get *impossible* acts of enunciation that redirect the entire semantic system. Such originality seems rare but it could be simply that modernity suppresses evidences of such originality. Shakespeare did not have to cope with science.

Purpose conceived in terms of enunciation is more personal than world-historical purpose. Self-conscious enunciation does not aspire to construct a fictional objectivity free and clear of discursive systems; it does not seek the answering gaze that “confirms” the view; it does not hope in dealing with human experience to keep the straight face of science especially social science. History that approximates science – the search for “facts” and “causes” based on the model of empirical science – explains things, even religious movements and family relationships, by appearing to transcend messy subjectivity. In the Discursive Condition, on the other hand, history at best can present itself as an interpretive discipline, a semantic system operating like all languages as Saussure describes them, according to certain rules. In this context (lower-case) history is one narrative format among others: a powerful and widely assumed format that forecloses on some things and enables others. Is History a humanities or a social science discipline? Precisely the question I once asked a distinguished colleague in the History Department, who answered, “it depends on where the money is.” In modernity the money was all with science so historians like my colleague quite understandably went there. In the Discursive Condition history may be easier to justify in its humanistic valence, as an art, a coded possibility of enunciation; but that will involve methodological experiment with terms appropriate to new terrain.

My purpose in rethinking history is to find appropriate practical responses to the challenges of living in the Discursive Condition, particularly as regards the founding assumptions about civic and political order that are generally assumed in the United States. Of course I recognize the powers of history to level the field of explanation and to permit solutions to problems of identity and project that once were solved by hierarchical systems; but those solutions are centuries old and are proving themselves bootless in the effort to dismantle contemporary hierarchies. The Discursive Condition presents a broadly expressed challenge to Enlightenment principles and, because ignoring the challenge is not an option, the next step is to discover what possibilities, if any, may exist for renewing those principles in terms of the Discursive Condition. What kinds of writing – in the expanded Saussurian sense of “writing” – are adequate to the semantic complexity, the *palimpsestuousness* of the present? What constructions of time, collective memory, agency? What description of social order, what function for institutions? These are quintessentially ethical questions because they require attention to code.

New tools of thought seem urgently needed in a public-based political order in which the public has less and less traction. In my view it is way past the time when it was possible to keep “doing” modern history as if it were 1848 or even 1968, and to keep taking for granted and never mentioning the fact that the objectification of the world is not the premise but the product of historical conventions. In the United States repetitive use of the same old methods (languages, semantic systems) has resulted in increasingly threadbare public discussion. Genuinely cross-disciplinary work (as opposed to mere splicing activities that preserve the disciplinary status quo) would sponsor other new possibilities, including forums that encourage risk-taking and that avoid the usual methods for preventing exchange, such as performances of The Expertise That Silences or the parade of “stars.” But such genuinely multidisciplinary work remains largely unfunded and marginal in the system of university knowledge silos. Keith Jenkins proposes that academic historians “think again . . . begin again . . . this time in postmodern ways” and recognizing that what is called History is “*just us back there*, throwing our voice.” The “before now” is a dimension of a present enunciation, not something “out there” or “in” time (Jenkins, 2003, pp. 60, 56). Choosing one method over another, however un-self-consciously, is a choice that we make, as Hayden White said long ago, for “moral and aesthetic reasons”: in other words, for reasons of personal purpose and aspiration (White, 1973, p. 433). To change the thinking, change the tools of thought.

How, then, to imagine alternative methods, regimens, tools of thought? A first step would be to consult those who have already experimented with such methods as if change might have positive value. However drastic it may seem to an historian to abandon the tools of conventional historical explanation, doing so does not mean reducing an entire culture to rubble. To assume so is merely the kind of denial represented by the painting at the Whitney Museum in New York, all in shades of grey, which shows just such a field of rubble

and is entitled "Robbe-Grillet Surveys His World." This juvenile joke trivializes in order to dismiss Robbe-Grillet's work without having understood anything about its strong, almost musical exploration of discursive time (Ermarth, 1992, pp. 72–83). Foundational change only suggests rubble to those clinging to the one foundation because they can imagine no other. There is no rubble, only phases of order. There is no blank slate, only the need to renew individuality and agency and causality in terms of multiple semantic systems rather than in terms of neutrality. "The past" doesn't disappear, but it is not a place, and it no longer functions as the lost launcher of the present but instead as a dimension of present events of enunciation. Individual choices no longer occur in a World Historical horizon but in terms of complex sites of enunciation. Time itself functions as a dimension of events and not as the neutral medium for World Historical operations and individuals. What is wanted are historians using methods appropriate to a condition of irreducible semantic multiplicity and capable of registering instead of denying their Discursive Condition.

What alternatives are there to the historical method, the one that conventionally describes facts as evidence of individual and collective actions producing causal (if not intentional) results? One option for historians is writing *about* acts of enunciation as practiced by others without the added difficulty of inspecting their own operating code at the same time. The classic example is Roland Barthes who in books like *L'Empire des signes* (1970) or *Mythologies* (1957) treated certain cultural manifestations (wrestling, Noh theater, toys, the face of Garbo, bowing, the *Blue Guide*, plastic) as acts of enunciation in the sense discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. Barthes took what conventional history – to the extent that it approaches "cultural" material at all – would treat as "evidence," and instead treated it as specifications of cultural codes: codes that are powerful in collective life and more accessible to intuition than to science. Barthes directs attention to the tacit grammars implicit in and accessible through enunciation. His effort didn't always lead to *eclaircissement*, especially not in social scientific terms, and it didn't always acknowledge two crucial properties of enunciation: the possibility of silent enunciation as it defines consciousness, and the crucial multiplicity of enunciation whereby one "speaks" simultaneously in the languages of gender, nationality, profession, and so on – always several, never single. But these limitations are nothing to the sheer creative achievement of Barthes's writing, its suggestiveness and resonance, its courage in following a hunch rather than relentlessly constituting a Drop Dead Rational sequence of "evidence."

His essays are not precisely "history" but they do acknowledge the past as a function of the present, and they do treat details as specifications or symptoms of codes that operate culturally in ways that are both mysterious and powerful: a better model than prevailing ones, perhaps, for approaching, say Enron and Pentagon. The historian acting in the Discursive Condition can trace back from particular acts of enunciation to the differential systems of meaning and value they imply. What codes, what tacit knowledge, what implicit understandings

govern the operation of such powerful systemic influences in U.S. society as the multinational corporation, the media, real estate development, Texas, the tax system, the Israel lobby, the highway lobby, the U.S. Constitution, the shopping mall, “the market”? Maybe, as with any code, the subliminal order comes to light more easily at times of crises, in actions which are not quite “up to code” (Enron, Abu Ghraib, embezzlement, Iran Contra, celebrity trials). Some intrepid explorers even attempt to write in ways that highlight their own methodological commitments and limitations. Kathleen Stewart, for example, in her book on West Virginia (*A Space by the Side of the Road*) finds a way to frame her own method as anthropological observer in such a way as to make use of its powers at the same time as she demonstrates its limitations.

Other examples appear in popular culture and in fact the public generally is accustomed to Discursive Conditions through film and other media. Anthematic practices have become quite familiar, even though the term is new. Take the following two examples from cinema – two among the many possibilities where the director abandons the conventional historical sequences so familiar from John Ford through John Lucas. My two examples are George Clooney’s *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005, U.S.) and Alexander Payne’s *Sideways* (2004, U.S.). In each case the audiences for these films entirely understand the gambit and even relish the opportunity each provides to play with new tools of thought.

George Clooney’s *Good Night, and Good Luck* demonstrates how methodological experiment works, helping to make my point about history and choice although through artistic means (method) rather than through argument (artists usually are ahead of the curve). The film brilliantly thwarts the seductions of history; it grasps the periodicity, the finitude of even space and time, and so can put the problem of individual choice and action squarely at the heart of its problematic. The film is about the influential journalist, Edward R. Murrow, his troubled times, and especially the political and cultural problems in the United States of the 1950s, resurgent in the U.S. circa. 2002–2006. It’s hard to imagine a wider historical horizon for the protagonist of this film, Edward R. Murrow, or for the implications of his campaign against the fascistic persecutions conducted by Senator Joseph McCarthy. The actions in the film, many of which are drawn from video archives, have their eclat precisely because they qualify as historically profound. They are actions that could qualify as World Historical, enacted by men that qualify as cultural heroes and world historical agents, larger-than-life examples of conscience and courage. The stakes are nothing less than the survival of democratic principles in the United States.

If John Ford or George Lucas had made this film they might have provided viewers with the wide horizons and infinities so customary in American cinema in which such issues play out over time. But not the director of this film. It has none of that big sky and long trail of distancing consequences found in everything from *Stagecoach* to *Star Wars*. Instead, *Good Night, and*

Good Luck takes place almost entirely in very tightly enclosed interior spaces disconnected from each other: either the offices of CBS broadcast news, or the booth in a restaurant, or tiny parts of a couple's domestic space. While hindsight assures us in retrospect that these are World Historical heroes – Murrow, Fred Friendly and, almost as fully, the head of CBS, William S. Paley – the film insists through its format that the space of choice is not infinite but closed, very limited, and very consequential. At the moment of choice there are no outcomes to consult in order to work backward to find the “right” choice; no one then knew what the future outcome would be and no one had the luxury of much reflection. Any preparation – in terms of building character and courage – had to have been done already. The space of choice here has nothing to do with the infinite horizons and possible futures of history. The film in effect yanks spectators out of their spectatorhood and subjects them to the uncertainties of the closed space of choice.

Of course an important dimension of this film is the fact that most of its audience knows which futures were realized and which were not, so its success is a case precisely of reasoning backward from the outcomes to the “right” choices that made them possible, and putting those choices on display. But the most important part of the film's effect is its format, its medium, the How that is also the What. Viewers and readers are made to experience the closed space of choice. The infinite neutralities of history have to take care of themselves. In that closed space, *and only there*, is the opportunity for creative intervention in complex, consequential political, economic, and social systems.

More briefly, the other film, *Sideways*, engages its audience in a sequence not unlike the one described in Chapter 4, the anthematic development of patterns that can be seen as either plot driven or plot-defying, depending on the capacity of the viewer. The gambit is a bachelor trip through Napa Valley by the feckless groom-to-be and his feckless friend. These protagonists are not admirable, in fact, they are tedious, self-involved, trivializing guys who are nice enough, except the groom-to-be has a fling with a stranger who beats him up when she learns he's engaged, and his friend prides (no, preens) himself on his specialist's knowledge of wine, gets interested in a young woman who returns his interest, and then can't get himself to claim his object of desire. All this would be quotidien inadequacy with Lacanian overtones, except for the camera. The camera quietly prepares for its audience a whole series of thematic elements that take advantage of the comic qualities of the heroes, the beauty of the countryside, even a kind of architectural intrigue. One series involves lens angles looking down from above at a Volkswagen driven by the wine expert as he hesitates at the intersection between turning in the direction that leads to his lady or turning in the opposite direction. He pauses, and then chooses avoidance with hilariously self-defeating regularity. Another is the road theme in which the car is viewed, and viewed again, between one episode and another speeding along sideways from one side of

the screen to the other, with no visible destination or horizon and busily “lost” amid fields of grain. Another theme is the series of front doors, from the ghastly McMansion of scene one, home of the bride-to-be, to a whole series of less pretentious, more beautiful doorways and their approaches. These are only some of the elements. Even a viewer unaccustomed to looking for such anthemic developments responds to the comic disjunctions that provide, as it were, a series moving sideways to the plot, establishing an alternative universe of value.

Consider once again briefly the problems with historical methods. Conventional historical explanation gives us mental tools that require the increasingly burdensome effort of functioning in an infinite horizon and of making those comparisons between widely separated cases which define empiricism and representation. By convention, the neutral time of history goes on forever. Over the near horizon there is another horizon, and another to infinity; beyond the immediate future, is another, farther future, and another beyond that to infinity. In such conditions individual choice has a daunting potential for future influence and yet seems, looking forward from the present, to have relatively minuscule power. It is daunting and confusing, a bit like the relationship in Protestantism between works and salvation: the one so small and ultimately ineffectual, the other so profoundly consequential. On the one hand, everything is at stake; on the other hand my individual power over the outcome shrinks to nearly nothing in a horizon of infinite possibility. It is enough to make me procrastinate; there will always be time to make that choice tomorrow. Always time. This is one of the siren songs of conventional history.

In such conditions *choice is easily diminished, postponed, even trivialized, and this is one of the foreclosures enforced by conventional historical knowledge*. What is at stake is more than accuracy of description; what is at stake are the powers of choice and creativity. Historical knowledge *by definition* involves perspective, not action. On the vast plain of history causality remains veiled, abstract, accessible only in retrospect. Choice is little more than a gamble: potentially hugely consequential and yet in the present moment relatively trivial, almost accidental. No wonder we are all home “counting our Porsches” as one commentator put it; the difficulty of pursuing political agendas on the infinite field of History is too great; action always happens at times and places that are “always somewhere else” (Boyle, p. 8). Besides, it is always possible that your Porsche may be a sign of grace.

This may be the condition of “freedom” but I doubt it; it seems more the condition of anomie. I fully appreciate the importance of information and “facts”; flying blind is not desirable and is not the only available alternative. But the case for studying conventional history is precisely that, by giving us the facts, it can guide choice. Perhaps someone will give me examples of where this has happened? How well has “never again” worked to prevent genocide? In Darfur? How well did neutrality work in Srebrenica? Hindsight would suggest a course of action that seems clear enough intellectually, but

it produces no action. Inability to recognize this fact currently plagues liberalism in the U.S., both in education and in politics. Historical knowledge does not appear in itself to sponsor creative action, and that is no accident. The temporal infinities of history, and the invisible causalities and identities they sponsor, dematerialize the present, turning it from a point of concrete and even qualitative value into a point of transit where abstract causalities produce their emergent forms. The values in such transactions are quantitative (how much, how far, how long, how big) not qualitative (how complex, how effective, how new, how organized).

Facing such insoluble dilemmas it is easier to go shopping; at least there choice and its consequences seem perceivable, if somewhat trivial. I do not exaggerate. In the United States consumer "choice" – or at least the appearance of choice – is practically a metaphysic. When George W. Bush told people in 2001 to respond to 9/11 by going shopping he was not tripping over his tongue, though it may have sounded that way to Europeans who, though they have fewer items to choose among, nevertheless are accustomed to having far more actual choice than Americans have. Shopping, and the advertising that goes with it, keeps a future open and makes choice possible, albeit at the cost of trivializing both choice and the future.

Finally, the following summary of new methodological options fits the examples just given from films and fits also those alternative methodologies described above in Chapters 2 to 4 in terms of narrative systems and language, and of the philosophical and scientific descriptions cognate with them. Extended discussions of new narrative strategies in Robbe-Grillet, Cortázar, and Nabokov appear in *Sequel to History* (Ermarth, 1992). Such explorations outside the conventional historical format provide the following new approaches to narrative format that have so far been explored mainly in experimental novels, drama, visual art, and film. They require any historian using them to acknowledge the fictionality of the enterprise.

1. The development of themes based on iterative details and patterning rather than on plot-and-character.
2. The use of details that act as *thematic alphabets* of emerging figures or systemic elements.
3. The simultaneous development of several such *figures* creating *palimpsestuousness*.
4. Emphasis on *rhythm* or *rhyme* or *the phrase*, rather than on causal and motivational structure.
5. Sequences, series, that are *inflected* rather than *plotted*.
6. Emphasis on *difference* not on resemblance.
7. A *formality of sustained interruption* rather than the convergences and agreements of history's formal consensus; the creation of *pattern from the "noise" that interrupts pattern*.
8. A narrative line constituted by a *process of digression and return*.

9. Emphasis on fabrication not representation; *conspicuous construction* not the pretense of naturalness.
10. Pasts as dimensions of present enunciation.
11. Mnemonic patterns that treat the past as a dimension of the present rather than a disposable launching stage for it.
12. Allowance for a personal voice and expression of purpose.
13. Opportunity for bringing disciplinary specialization into a process of cross disciplinary hazard, iterative “tries,” chance encounters in a universe of multiple semantic systems.
14. Confine writing as much as possible to the present tense.
15. Foregrounding of the “obscure enterprise of form.”

A series with these qualities amounts to an “anthematic” series corresponding to the “anthematic subject” of Chapter 3 and the anthematic recognitions of Chapter 4. It would reconstitute the sequence in figural rather than in representational terms, presenting a series in which things rhyme rather than evolve. It would foster a rhythmic, iterative rather than neutral narrative time. Figural “themes” would develop, like musical themes, through parallel syntaxes like those valued in surrealism where patterns rather than plot events inflect the sequence. The sequences wander instead of progress; their time approximates rhythmic or “phrase time” not the “disaster of receding time” (Nabokov, 1969). Memory does not involve slipping into the depths of the past but on the contrary, maintaining the act of attention on the pasts-inflected present in which you are simultaneously reading this sentence and thinking that your library books are overdue and that dinner will be rack of lamb. Memory, conceived in terms of semantic multiplicity and complex acts of enunciation, sticks to the present moment *and inflects* it. A renewed historical method, one faithful to this present, would at the very least re-inflect the “language” of history, so that reference is not constrained to the line but can cross it, as poetry does. In such sequences each specification of a semantic potential is the beginning or development of a pattern with systemic potentialities of its own.

Keith Jenkins, one of the few historians actually willing to accept the gambit and look for alternatives, describes the “anthematic alternative” as “not just an attractive but an almost unavoidable alternative” to conventional historical explanation for the reason that:

postmodernism . . . is not some sort of fashion, nor some kind of critical discourse that can be ignored or recuperated back into modernity in the guise of “pluralistic interpretations”; [it is] no good, thinking that postmodernist insights . . . can be somehow grafted onto modernist histories which might allow them to overcome postmodern “critique” and thus survive intact.

(Jenkins, 2003, pp. 66–68)

Whatever the alternatives to conventional history look like they will not reconstruct objectivity and neutrality. They can, however, respect the present and use the past in ways that have heretofore been inaccessible in historical codes and that could have renewed value today, both for professional historians who in so many ways train the public mind, and for the habitual historians who learn from them.

The “anthematic alternative” accommodates the semantic overload that characterizes the present of most people’s experience, even as our historical tools of thought suppress that potential overload, that associative volatility, that *palimpsestuousness* discussed in Chapter 3. For this alone the anthematic alternative would be worth exploring, and if only as a threshold to other, richer alternatives possible in the Discursive Condition. But to do this, professional historians might have the courage to take intellectual risks of a kind discouraged by disciplinary definitions: to make a mainstream enterprise out of crossing disciplinary boundaries responsibly, which means humbly, even provisionally. Even if one’s goal is to renew the status quo, the methods of different disciplines cross-fertilize and renew business as usual so insisting on multidisciplinary crossings is essential. A disciplinary lens that focuses on (arbitrarily formatted) historical periods or on a particular content, such as art or politics, simply cannot register the systemic similarities that exist between, say, Renaissance painting and nineteenth-century historical narrative.

Historians looking for methodological adequacy would abandon the lingering scientism born of modernity and secured by knowledge silos, and would approach the problems of purpose and value that inhere in the semantic systems of culture. Meantime, and at the very least, everyone should consider terminating casual use of terms like “postmodern history,” “postmodernists,” and “postmodernism”: casual usages that too often rest on unexamined assumptions, perpetuate confusion and, worst of all, obscure what is at stake.

The powers of history belong to a cultural system that has been in place for at least half a millenium. The challenges to that system are neither rare nor frivolous. We need to assimilate what is assimilable, discard what is not, and move on. Mere repetition of standard practice amounts to denial. It is a waste of time to shoot the messengers. Given these undeniable conditions, given the breadth of the challenge to modernity, and given the degree to which historians in North America have resisted or trivialized it, registering the critique seems all the more important. It is possible, it seems desirable, and it may even be politically urgent for historians in North America to seek methodological accommodations appropriate to the Discursive Condition: accommodations that would end unjustifiable requirements for objectivity in order to preserve the past as a source of value.

6 Action and art

You got to accentuate the positive
Eliminate the negative
And latch on to the affirmative;
Don't mess with Mr. In-Between

(Johnny Mercer)

Writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and the other without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death . . .

(Hélène Cixous)

The challenge presented by the Discursive Condition to modernity has profound implications not only for the assumptions about identity, time, causality, and language already discussed, but also for assumptions about politics and about the sources of creative change. To those who assume that our current and largely unexamined assumptions are and always have been the only possible ones with regard to such fundamental issues, the changes involved can seem profoundly negative. Even acknowledging the profundity of the cultural change involved, where does anyone start considering how to find or forge new tools of thought? How does one find new formulation for events or actions that are conceived as enunciation and not as phenomena of a billiard-ball universe with its objectivities and causalities? What kind of definitions are possible when every meaning and value is to be understood negatively through its relation to everything else in its semiological (operating) system? In the Discursive Condition it is impossible not to "mess with Mr. In-Between" as the Mercer lyric of the 1940s puts it, because, as Cixous has said, that "in-between" is precisely the site of "writing," in other words, the site of enunciation.

Begin with this hypothesis: that *enunciation*, as a formality of the Discursive Condition, is the same kind of event in every system, regardless of its materials; that enunciation is simply *practice understood as a semiological event*, in other words, an event intelligible within a single or a finite set of discursive regimens (most events of enunciation engage multiple semiological systems

simultaneously). To accept this common situation for all kinds of practices provides, among other things, an escape from the invidious distinctions between art and “reality” that rationalism imposed three centuries ago and that has resulted in the assigning “creativity” to a room of its own called the “aesthetic” where its powers have become safely marginalized. Such distinctions, based as they are on ancient essentialist ideas of “kinds,” have had deleterious effects even on the Enlightenment project itself by favoring empirical and quantitatively based approaches to knowledge.

This chapter approaches the problem of forging new tools of thought through new acts of enunciation. The Modern Condition (discussed in Chapter 1) has sponsored ideas of action as something individual, deliberate and instrumental. Actions are done by essential agents picking up tools such as language in neutral space and time. That unitary individual agent may be subdivided and contested or multiplied and massed but, like any object in the objectified modern universe, it is one and “the same” through time and space. Actions are “undertaken” by such individuals for particular instrumental purposes from which they remain apart. They and their action are separate.

By contrast, in the Discursive Condition (discussed in Chapter 2), what is “individual” is (as discussed in Chapter 3) not so much an object as an action, even a series of actions, the fullest expression of which is the trajectory of a person’s entire life including its many patterns, its false “tries,” its achievements. Such individuality does not stand apart from its actions like the modern individual with its internal, impossibly invariant core or cogito. In the Discursive Condition identities are inseparable from actions and this in turn influences the definition of causality. The Discursive Condition is no longer a billiard ball universe but a palimpsest of the systems available at any given discursive intersection and in which causalities necessarily operate unpredictably. Learning to “act” in these conditions involves quite a different set of abilities from those required by the Modern Condition as it has been defined in the era since the Renaissance. Action in the Discursive Condition is not conceived in terms of rationalizations, resistances, neutralities, and consensus apparatuses of modernity; discursive action is conceived as an enunciation, that is, as a specification of codes where multiple codes are in play, and where those multiple codes are largely accepted without scrutiny just as the rules of a language are accepted by native speakers. What is enunciated is always a particular specification of the rules, never the rules themselves. Focus on the rule regimens themselves would be the work of specialists, perhaps historians.

If the anthematic subjectivity cannot be deployed in the same way as the modern “individual,” as the basis for a universally rationalized consensus apparatus, then on what basis do such subjectivities make sense to each other and produce results, including political results? What prevents them from dissolving into helpless functions of whatever system supports and informs them? Without the modern grammars of perspective that produce the common denominators of modernity (e.g., neutral time and space), what becomes of

the entire culture of representation, especially democratic institutions? Do “anthematic” recognitions allow for any kind of collective practice recognizable as democratic politics? Is there such a thing as a collective enunciation? Is meaningful connection possible, in other words, can we group many “anthematic” subjectivities so they “add up” in some way that makes their practices intelligible as meaning, or are they just random relative to one another? On what basis, if any, are social or political unities possible?

Such questions, some addressed in preceding chapters, may be entirely understandable because they belong to modernity with its unified fields, its rational processes, its discrete entities and agents. They presume an entire rationalist system of modernity; they are non-questions in postmodernity. The premise is the problem. Such questions would have been viable, even radical questions in 1509. In 2009 they presume definitions of individuality, agency and causality that no longer function unproblematically. In 2009 they are obstacles. The most immediate problem with regard to the effective exercise of political agency is formulating the right questions, so that they address the problems relevant to existing conditions. The real answer to those questions – what about others? – is that there is something wrong with the question. What “others”? There are no monads in the Discursive Condition to which we might attach the little stickers that say “self” and “other.” There is not even anything such as “the” event, “the” action, or “the” past. Such formulations lapse back into the objectifying terms of modernity and thus instantly overcome any possibility of new departure and new usage. There is not even any such thing as singularity (except perhaps somatic singularity) in a world of enunciative events because every enunciation presupposes one or several “languages” or semiological systems, discursive sets of differential relationships enabling the production of meaning and value. The undertow of long-accustomed usage drags thought back from new beachheads. To keep doing this is to keep re-creating the problem with no possibility of renewal. The modern subject may be aware that multilevel thinking operates in the event, even (perhaps especially) in those most important moments such as the one where you remember that your toaster did not work this morning, at the same moment as you are pledging to love, obey, and cherish till death do you part. But the rationalizing tools of modernity tend to treat such multilevel simultaneity as exceptional, even a bit pathological. The challenge to modernity that goes to its foundations cannot keep those foundations intact. There is no modern way out of the crisis of modernity. As Václav Havel warned global economic leaders at Davos, there is no such thing as “an objective way out of the crisis of objectivism.” As soon as you use the old tools of thought, you get the old outcomes.

The Discursive Condition depreciates the status of the modern assumption that everyone occupies a common medium and thus by definition problematizes even the possibility of formal agreement and thereby problematizing the modern field of potential reconciliation. There is no possibility in the quantum universe for the neutral media that from the Quattrocento to the new

millennium have been foundational to modernity. The challenge this presents to consensus politics is all too evident. If these facts are to be greeted with curiosity, not resistance, western societies must consider how to renew democratic practice for existing conditions that do not foster consensus. In Jean-François Lyotard's terms, politics is "the threat of the differend": a difference that is not a thing, not a positivity, but instead a perpetual and systemic relationship through differentiation (Lyotard, 1988, p. 136, para. 184). The world most of us now inhabit is informed by enunciations that specify powerful but ghostly codes of the "languages" we occupy, both verbal and other kinds of language (semiological system). The various differends involved are merely the differences that make inter-subjectivity possible and that must be negotiated constantly. Where the political agendas of modernity reduced, sublimated, or denied differences in order to objectify the world (the whale cannot be both mammal and fish), so politics in the Discursive Condition treats difference as constitutive and irreducible (the whale can be a fish, just not in biology). That shift of emphasis to the differend forecloses on all the endless wars for possession of Truth. It constrains all activity to the play of systems wherein all definition is differential and internal to a system, and thus no basis for truth claims, only functionality claims. While attention has been paid to the nature of the sign and to the outcomes of semiotics for traditional tools of thought, the mediate condition always implied in Saussure still has not been sufficiently developed, perhaps in part because it requires new tools of thought still insufficiently forged.

The codes that constitute the Discursive Condition are precise taskmasters; it is a condition in which consensus operations are conspicuously frail. In any given system, certain things work and others do not. To take a small instance, in some systems it is a sign of good manners to follow the host into the kitchen and offer to "help," and in other systems it is not. There is no book listing this tiny difference in the palimpsest of codes; the only way to learn that difference is through practice or rather through enunciation even one that is only a mistake. The only way to influence or alter such codes is through enunciation that pushes the rules, exercising the systemic potentials in new ways. Merely asserting the importance of neutrality and consensus – something rife in political language in the West – has little truth value and it appears to have increasingly smaller domains of functionality. For example, in Bosnia and Kosovo we witnessed the humiliating paralysis of the Western Alliance; a paralysis symptomatic of a deep discursive and cultural irresolution in the discourse of modernity on which that Alliance has been based. Particularly poignant were the images of U.N. troops wearing the blue berets that marked the "neutrality" requisite for providing "mediation" in conditions that proved unmediateable, justified no neutrality, and called the whole effort into question. Currently in the Middle East and in Asia intractable conflicts continue to contest the modern faith in neutrality and in the ultimate power of universal common denominators. Especially for societies saturated by empiricism, as English-speaking societies tend to be, the most difficult thing to accept about

the Discursive Condition is that there *is* no mediating frame, no common denominator, no constant, and especially no neutral time and space to act as the common bases of resolution for universally valid rules. Democratic values, for example, must be justified locally in new ways, not just in terms of universally “self-evident” Truths, although those do have their poetic function. Where racial, ethnic, and religious conflicts create wars over possession of the Truth, the very idea of “human rights” is thrown into question and requires some further justification beyond the fact that it seems an obvious value in Eurocentric societies, at least in theory.

All this predictably makes easy moralists restive. What about genocide? What about Neo-Nazism? What about the Ku Klux Klan? Is everything permitted? Approaching these “unanswerable” rhetorical questions is essential. But in answer we might begin by accepting this premise: that the Discursive Condition has *not* created the succession of genocides in recent times. Far from it. In fact, as I argued in Chapter 4, local fascisms are the quintessential contemporary outcomes of modernity because they essentially deny the absolute plurality of systems, the irreducibility of difference. Does this mean that the code of Nazis is equivalent to the code of Mother Theresa? Of course not. The question is nonsense and distorts the issues because it implies a common denominator between two things which have no common element beyond being systemic. In the Discursive Condition no value attaches to either of these systemic potentials because that is all they are. To repeat the important point from Chapter 5: *only enunciation adds value*. There is no ideal riposte to National Socialism and to assume otherwise is to waive responsibility for one’s unavoidable engagement. Slavoj Žižek says something similar in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*: “there is no ‘Fascism *avant la lettre*’, because it is the letter itself (the nomination) which makes Fascism proper out of the bundle of elements” (Žižek, 2002, p. 76). But our default (that is, modern) tools of thought do not tell us that; they tell us that the bundle of elements are not random elements but rationalized ones, could we but find the appropriate level of (scientistic) generalization from which to “understand” them. Such tools always presume objectification where none exists. The paralysis of Western liberalism is hardly surprising in such circumstances.

Speaking for an adequate new politics, Václav Havel took the problem a few years ago to the World Economic Forum in Davos. In his 1992 speech to the assemblage of world political and business leaders he said the following about the end of modernity:

The modern era has been dominated by the culminating belief, expressed in different forms, that the world – and Being as such – is a wholly knowable system governed by a finite number of universal laws that man can grasp and rationally direct for his own benefit. This era, beginning with the Renaissance . . . gave rise to the proud belief that man, as the pinnacle of everything that exists, was capable of objectively describing,

explaining and controlling everything that exists, and of possessing the one and only truth about the world.

Havel goes on to denounce what he calls the “cult of depersonalized objectivity” in which a few propositions can masquerade as the only truth. Communism was the “perverse extreme” he mentions, but he indicates that any dogmatic and totalizing agenda would qualify, and these might well include those of either the Religious Right or the Dogmatic Left. He continues:

The end of Communism is a serious warning to all mankind. It is a signal that the era of arrogant, absolutist reason is drawing to a close and that it is high time to draw conclusions from that fact.

Communism was not defeated by military force, but by life . . . by a revolt of color, authenticity, history in all its variety and human individuality against imprisonment within a uniform ideology.

He says this signal is not being heeded. For example, with regard to global conditions such as disease, famine, terrorism, nuclear threat, genocide, or dispossession,

we treat the fatal consequences of technology as though they were a technical defect that could be remedied by technology alone. We are looking for an objective way out of the crisis of objectivism.

Everything would seem to suggest that this is not the way to go.

What is needed is something different, something larger. Man’s attitude to the world must be radically changed. We have to abandon the arrogant belief that the world is merely a puzzle to be solved, a machine with instructions for use waiting to be discovered, a body of information to be fed into a computer in the hope that, sooner or later, it will spit out a universal solution.

Many of the traditional mechanisms of democracy created and developed and conserved in the modern era are so linked to the cult of objectivity and statistical average that they can annul human individuality.

Sooner or later politics will be faced with the task of finding a new, postmodern face.

(Havel, 1992)

Havel speaks of communism but also of its apparent Other in the West. George Soros and others have pointed out that the self-serving rhetoric of Soviet communism does not differ all that much from the self-serving rhetoric of (so-called democratic) Western bureaucracies and corporations. It would be appropriate to apply much of what Havel says about the cult of objectivity

and the annulment of individuality to federal bureaucracies in the democratic West, and to autocratic multinational corporations – Shell Oil in Nigeria for example – that are based in the West and devoted to international trade with monogamous zeal and with no apparent recognition that this trade is colonization, and no hint of grasping that the economic blowback at home threatens the basis of their enterprise. To speak as Havel does of the new, postmodern face of politics is to express a faith that the requisite cultural adjustments are not only necessary, but possible.

But how does such re-creative effort happen? Social and political renewal does not come about by using the same tools that have created the problem in the first place, but by forging new tools. What does exist in the linguistified universe is the perpetual opportunity to change usage; the opportunity in each and every successful moment to use systemic potentials differently, even if only a little differently or only for a moment. The creative moment is potentially every moment and is not at all a matter of extraordinary intervention on the grand historical scale. A mob is not required for re-creative change to happen; the only question is, will the creative enunciation “take” or not? Creative enunciation happens only in the realm of routine, not in some extraordinary “aesthetic” realm where only extraordinary persons can function.

The division of action from art, the division of politics from “aesthetic” practice, was an Enlightenment strategy that banished art to a Category of Its Own at the margins of modern societies in much the same way as Aeschylean Athens once banished *its* creative forces, the Furies, so that Apollonian reason could rule. In both cases the long-term effects were not good. The term “aesthetic” (from the Greek word for “things perceptible by the senses”) only developed its current categorical definition in Western societies after 1700. Before that time there was no need for an “aesthetic” realm set apart from any kind of reason, pure or practical. Three hundred years later we have got so accustomed to the term “aesthetic” that without thinking we accept the trivialization of artistic practice, it entails and reinscribes with every repetitive enunciation. The arts are for weekends and Section 5 of the newspaper. Art is the first thing a cost-cutting superintendent of schools cuts from the curriculum. Even the term “art” is a relatively modern invention, a term derived from Old French and Old English words for skill. Perhaps both terms – “art” and “aesthetic” – will lose functionality as the Discursive Condition undoes that Platonic segregation between sensible and ideal and restores creative powers to the center of social renewal where they belong. For the first time in three centuries the Discursive Condition makes accomplishing that restoration imaginable.

It is worth noting that “fine” art does not necessarily have anything to do with creative enunciation; it is more an economic category. Art – in other words, creative struggle with the fundamentals of expression – is an Act, not an investment opportunity. The distinction gets lost on a regular basis. Take, for example, a brief newspaper article under the title, “Frame your fine art purchases with research” (Friedmann). “So you want to invest in fine art but

don't know where to start?" Here's the expert's advice: don't bother with schools or courses, go to galleries and museums and ask lots of questions about what medium is used, when was the piece made, and what did the artist hope to accomplish. Tips: decide whether you are investing or buying for pleasure, if the latter, then "art is art" as long as it goes with "the style of your furnishings," and remember that "investing in art can be financially rewarding" but you'll need authenticating statements and a history of origin. There you have it from an "art" expert. The Taliban appear to have understood better the intimate relation between politics and art when they banned any kind of artistic expression – music, visual art, dance, sculpture, theater – as a first priority in their Afghanistan. In any case, whether by banishment or by trivialization, a society that marginalizes artistic practice may be one heading into decline.

To summarize, the creative enunciation that qualifies as art is the one that pushes the system. That is what creative action is in any system. In politics, for example, creative action is not a consensus event. Slavoj Žižek addresses this directly in his little book on 9/11 and more at length in his *Parallax View* (2006) where he argues for an alternative to the politics of "resistance" so typical in the populism of recent modernity (the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). He argues that true politics involves not resistance but instead an un-precedented, even un-premeditated, Act. The modern instrumentalist tools of thought create a general impression that a political Act is by definition one that resists a flawed system. As many veterans of political action will testify, the opposite is the case. The genuinely political act opens a space for change; it creates a gap that marks the systemic limit either by pushing those limits or even by perpetrating a refusal. Žižek calls the latter "Bartleby" politics. This idea is familiar from the political activism in the United States during the mid-twentieth century. One successful activist, Saul Alinsky, said half a century ago in *Rules for Radicals* that all the "resistance" activities of various constituencies seeking a place in the system (listen up, feminists) only reinforce conventional usage by claiming a right to it. This idea would explain the uncanny predictability of "democratic" revolutions turning into their despotic opposites. A genuinely political Act, that is, one capable of sponsoring change without slipping into mere reinforcement or mere destruction, involves pushing conventional usage to the breaking point. *The Act Political is not a consensus event*. It is an action that disrupts the habitual usage or enunciation so as to unlock new potentials of a discursive system whether it is Elizabethan English, the stock market, or the rowing club rules. The Act differs from the kind of "action" characteristic of traditional liberal political strategies which are based on the ideas of individuality and instrumental action: ideas which are so often ineffectual today. The Act is neither intentional nor instrumental but instead something that a particular set of available discursive systems calls for: precisely *anthematic* action appropriate to the *anthematic* subject(s) discussed in previous chapters whose (non-verbal as well as verbal) enunciations involve multiple systemic relationships and influences.

Take as examples the following three events, each of which qualifies as a political Act in the Discursive Condition: (1) U.S. forces abusing prisoners on tape at Abu Ghraib; (2) an army officer confronting Senator Joseph McCarthy at a hearing, and; (3) a political candidate unexpectedly striking a collective chord. The scandal at Abu Ghraib exemplifies the way discursive regimens work in multiples and “sideways” rather than singly and progressively. The scandal there was not created by rogues, it was not ordered, and it was not an accident; it was systemic result, or enunciation, grounded in knowledge that was shared in “the way that one shares a dirty secret” (Žižek, 2006, p. 370). The same could probably be said of Enron, or of any number of institutional environments where intact discursive regimens operate out of control because they are out of sight to those dedicated to rational models. In the case of Sen. McCarthy, an important turning point in his career was the day when an army officer at a public hearing confronted the Senator with the simple question: “Sir, have you no shame?” It was such a small Act, yet also so overdetermined: so prepared in multiple ways by multiple systemic influences for this breaking point, if that point could be reached. That set of elements, coming together partly by chance and coincidence, not by plan, had the effect of a thunderbolt and marked the beginning of the end of McCarthyism. Yet it could as easily not have happened if, by chance, the person at the table that day had not for whatever “reason” asked that question and created a huge gap where mediation had been (the Senator is just doing his job, I don’t object because I’ve done nothing wrong etcetera). It was a break in a symbolic order that no one could describe until the moment when an alternative became evident through the gap opened up by that question. The final example is the statement of 2004 presidential candidate, Howard Dean, who announced from his podium “I want my county back”: a phrase with the same simplicity as the previous example and one that reverberated through the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign and reverberates still in U.S. politics. In each case the Act has been prepared in so many ways that the individual who finally tips the balance is half a medium, bringing into explicit form what is known but not acknowledged. It is the spontaneity – the being there – to give a voice to the particular discursive intersection that defines it. I doubt the army officer planned to say just that, just then.

The creative power of such Acts is that they mark a discursive boundary; they come as close as possible to that most difficult and valuable Action of *naming the discourse*. That is exactly what artists do, though deliberately and in different, more controllable mediums; they skillfully re-deploy their available discursive capacities in ways that open an interval between what the discursive system conventionally does and what it is capable of and could do. The effort of social renewal depends on the creation of those gaps, those intervals, those opportunities to work, as Cixous said, “in the in-between.” This might even be proper work for historians, once they have acknowledged their role as artists.

The Act therefore is less about resistance and more about pushing the envelope. Žižek cites the example of the *refusniks*, a group of Israeli soldiers who refused to serve in the occupied territories and in so doing performed a small miracle. They were not pacifists but soldiers, some highly decorated, who claimed they would not agree to fight “in order to dominate, expel, starve and humiliate an entire people.” They documented the Israeli atrocities they were no longer willing to be associated with. These *refusniks* gave body and function to events that would otherwise remain subject to deletion by a thousand denials. They expressed – they *were* – the capacity of the system that their refusal to go along made evident. This was an authentic political Act because it gave reality to an existing gap between systems by recognizing it; it marked a difference where formerly a mediation (or a sublimation) had been. Its opposite – which would have been, as Žižek says, “the form of ethical betrayal” – would have been to say of the Palestinians that they are all terrorists, “they are all the same” (2006, p. 118); in other words, to take the mediating distance that erases difference between civilians and terrorists. In so doing the *refusniks* also marked the difference between enunciation and potential and thus also the possibility of new enunciation. By *marking the gap*, they marked the difference between the unspeakable, unspoken systemic rules that govern on the one hand and on the other the power of enunciation to change the rules. Such a gap is what Einstein’s train metaphor (Chapter 2) opens up: a gap not just between two approximate measurements of the “same” thing but instead a gap between two equally valid points of view based on systems with no common denominator. In somewhat different terms Lyotard defines politics as “the threat of the differend” which is the site of intractable given differences in need of linkage (Lyotard, 1988, Ch. 4, para. 7).

The *refusniks* did not fix the situation. Was their Act a harbinger, or only something already half-forgotten? Did it “take”? The risk of the Act, of the creative effort is a risk borne by individual anthematic subjects in play; there is no way around it. A creative Act results from complex preparation involving multiple systems and outcomes, and almost never from a solo act by itself. This discursive preparation might involve many potential outcomes, not necessarily the particular outcomes evident to hindsight. A small act can move nothing or it can move mountains, depending on the conditions in which it occurs. The foundation of contemporary genetics was laid by a nineteenth-century monk, Gregor Mendel, and then forgotten for a century because it was not, as Foucault puts it, “in the true.” The rediscovery of his work was *not* possible in one discursive set, but *was* possible in another. Individual subjects have no way of controlling or plotting these outcomes, even though modernity told us they do; they have only particular discursively informed situations at which to act deliberately.

Still, the anthematic subjects in all these cases had the courage to risk something unheard of, even if the outcome was to be mainly grief for the risk-taker;

and too often the unintended consequences may outnumber the intended ones. Lech Walesa, Rosa Parks, Václav Havel, an army officer at a Congressional hearing, a presidential candidate, the *refusniks*: we remember them because their Act “took.” There are many whistle-blowers in the U.S. who took a risk and who did not succeed in changing practice: not because of failure on their part to Act but because the Discursive Conditions proved insufficient to support them. The preparation that supported the army officer at McCarthy’s hearing testifies to the fact that the society of the time was vital: that it maintained conditions sufficient not only for new thought and action but for successful assimilation of that new thought and action. The moribund sociality would allow only reinforcements (such as “resistance”), not such revitalizing originality.

In sum, creative Acts as definable in the Discursive Condition are not intentional in the modern sense. The Acts just described required the individual with courage and dedication, but they also involved discursive situations that were over-determined by many pressures. A short statement or a refusal to comply becomes a thunderbolt not because of the particular occasion but because conditions were sufficient to amplify the Act. That sufficiency, that preparedness could lie fallow were it not for the Act, and yet the particular Act was not a planned outcome but almost an accidental one. This puts a premium on individual preparation. Neither the army officer nor the presidential candidate could predict the effects of their speeches. Hindsight, the foundation of history – that is, the modern perspective apparatus par excellence – has a way of implying through reverse logic that the result was the end of a deliberately initiated causal sequence; the message is, plan carefully and you, too, can have such a result. But that leaves out language, discursive systems, the invisible “set” that actually denies or permits success or failure in any particular case in the Discursive Condition.

Žižek calls this “Bartleby” politics after Melville’s hero who would “prefer not to.” The *refusniks* merely refused. They did not propose an alternative system, they just refused to participate predictably in the existing one, thus creating a gap between its operations and its wider possibility. Marking that gap is an invitation to others. In Žižek’s terms, “this is how we pass from the politics of ‘resistance’ or ‘protestation,’ which parasitizes upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position *and* its negation.” Refusal opens up a gap that should not be filled by a new construct, but the opposite: through refusal “the *gap remains*” whatever the new construction. That gap introduces a new insecurity into the symbolic order. Today’s Bartleby might prefer not to contribute to charities that feed African orphans or promote feminism in Afghanistan. I do not agree with Jodi Dean that this is mainly a provocation, not a serious suggestion (Dean, p. 130); I take him at his word, that there is something more to political action and that something more involves the degree to which refusal opens doors or gets stuck as a form of complicity (Žižek, 2006, p. 381). Marking a

gap is marking a difference negatively, nothing more; it is not at all the same as “resistance” which is a positivity even as its expressions are against this and against that.

This goes to the heart of so-called liberal politics in the West and its uncanny weakness currently in pursuing its putative agendas. The goal of conventional resistance – where it exceeds personal ambition – is to change the system by joining it. How many ways must we learn that this Does Not Work before we abandon this approach? (See Carol Cohn’s classic essay on how joining the dominant system co-opts even the most dedicated resister as soon as she “learns the language.”) By seeking “to displace the limit of social exclusions” says Žižek, so as to include previously excluded groups in the exercise of power, the putatively radical political action only reinforces the system which produces the exclusion in the first place. “Radical politics thus becomes an endless mocking parody and provocation” (Žižek, 2002, p.101).

Today’s hegemonic attitude is that of ‘resistance’ – all the poetics of the dispersed marginal sexual, ethnic, lifestyle ‘multitudes’ . . . ‘resisting’ the mysterious central (capitalized) Power. Everyone ‘resists’ – from gays and lesbians to Rightist survivalists – so why not draw the logical conclusion that this discourse of ‘resistance’ is the norm today, and, as such, the main obstacle to the emergence of the discourse which would actually question the dominant relations?

(Žižek, 2002, p. 66)

His agenda is to circumvent “all the forms of resisting that help the system to reproduce itself by ensuring our participation in it” (ibid., 2006, p. 383): to expose the too-familiar, tiresomely correct, oppositional posturing that so often passes for political action and that so often has ultra conservative effects. A truly effective “radical,” as Alinsky pointed out in his *Rules for Radicals*, knows that negative feedback (“resistance”) only reinforces a system; positive feedback is what destroys it. Alinsky’s effective Actions were precisely not “resistances” but compliances. If the bank would not divest its South African holdings, but would offer a free hair-dryer for opening a checking account, then line up the entire city to open an account, and keep it up until the bank rethinks its position. It worked.

The very idea of “Resistance” may even allow the conscience to exercise without risk. One can do good and be home in time for tea. But by using the same tools of thought and practice that created the problem in the first place, such actions only reinforce the political and economic systems supposedly being changed by the new additions but actually being reinforced by them. Žižek insists on the importance of preserving “Bartleby” politics as the engine of a “parallax shift” that persists without resolution at the heart of political activity. A parallax shift, unlike a dialectical one, is

not merely the first, preparatory stage for the second, more “constructive” work of forming a new alternative order; it is the very source and background of this order, its permanent foundation. The difference between Bartleby’s gesture of withdrawal and the formation of a new order is – again, and for the last time – that of parallax: the very frantic and engaged activity of constructing a new order is sustained by an underlying “I would prefer not to” which forever reverberates in it.

(Žižek, 2006, p. 382)

The “ontology of the parallax is therefore that of the Moebius strip – the curved space that is bent onto itself” – or the temporal counterpart that I have called the “Moebius Trip” (Ermarth 1992, p. 67, etc.): the kind of sequence that calls its own foundations into question. Moebius spaces and times are finite, like the “phase space” of physics and the *phrase time* of the Discursive Condition discussed in Chapter 4. *The truly strategic action is one that registers the gap between potential and enunciation that acknowledges the way in which specification (enunciation) realizes potential.*

Examples of the difference between modern and postmodern politics in the sense being developed here appear side by side in Žižek’s example of former Yugoslavia. He writes in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* that before this country took its lethal course toward dissolution there was another way. When Milošević criticized Titoism the loyal opposition recoiled in horror when they should have taken the criticism into their own hands:

the only way to counter Milošević effectively would have been, rather than clinging to old ghosts, to risk taking a step further than he did: openly to submit Tito’s legacy itself to radical criticism. Or, to put it in more pathetic terms: it was not only Milošević who betrayed Tito’s legacy; on a deeper level, the very anti-Milošević defenders of Titoism, representatives of local nomenklaturas worried about their privileges, were already clinging only to the corpse of ritualized Titoism . . . The only true defender of what was really worth saving in Tito’s legacy was the Sarajevo government of independent Bosnia in the early 1990s.

(Žižek, 2002, pp. 124–125)

Opposition to Milošević only reinforces him; taking his position further would undermine him. Clinging to the ritualized corpse of a system – whether that system is Titoism, democratic politics as usual, representational art, historical explanation – insures the dissolution of that system. A successful Act in these conditions, says Žižek with regard to former Yugoslavia, would have disrupted the cycle inherent in the habitual usage and opened opportunities that were instead foreclosed. And it was not just the loyal opposition that lacked the kind of courage shown in my previous examples, it was the entire NATO alliance. The West stood by in their blue hats signifying neutrality while Sarajevo was brutalized nearly to extinction: Sarajevo, the admired,

cosmopolitan, world-class site of the Winter Olympics a decade earlier; Sarajevo the location of countless individual survivors of rape and genocide. Then Srebrenica . . .

Seeking a way past the impasses of modernity, artists have for more than a century provided new models for enunciation, employing paratactic devices at the expense of syntactical ones in their search for ways around or beyond modern unities and continuities. In the Discursive Condition, differential systems of value – Saussure’s semiological “languages” – include both syntactical and paratactical functions: *syntactic* relations that produce (a statement, a unity, a meaning), and *paratactic* relations that run (as the term suggests) parallel to the syntactic and productive sequence, remaining within sight of it, but heterogeneous to it. The para-powers (parataxis, parallax, parody) were employed by Dadaists and Surrealists before and between two world wars, and their digressive, unsettling formalities live on today in the best writing and cinema. The paratactic process provides methodological tools particularly well suited to the Discursive Condition, so I will turn to a few highly achieved examples from highly achieved sources such as literature and film in order to trace how parataxis trains new tools of thought.

Paratactic forms incorporate chance elements, something syntactic forms cannot do without converting chance into necessity through retrospectively perceived rationalization or causality. The Discursive Condition is a set-up for chance encounters given the absence of common denominators and the multitude of systems. Just as chaos is a phase of physical order, and just as “I prefer not to” is at the heart of political action, so the paratactic functions of language systems preserve the essential openness that is counterpart and stay to the system’s ability to produce meaning and value and thus to renew itself, perhaps in new terms or slightly different form depending on (I am tempted to say) the inertial system. Coherence is part of a larger process that includes elements heterogeneous to coherence.

It is precisely the heterogeneous possibilities of enunciation that constitute the vitality of the Discursive Condition. Julia Kristeva made the case for this kind of writing decades ago when she called for a theory that “would search within the signifying phenomenon for the *crisis* or the *unsettling process* of meaning and subject rather than for the coherence or identity of either *one* or a *multiplicity* of structures.” Kristeva’s unsettling process is not something marginal but something normative and fundamental for the proper functioning of semiological or language regimens. Kristeva’s language has “a disposition that is definitely heterogenous to meaning but always in sight of it . . .”; “it is poetic language that awakens our attention to this undecidable character of any so-called natural language, a feature that univocal, rational, scientific discourse tends to hide” (Kristeva, 1980, pp. 125, 132–135). Parataxis thus sustains the “associative volatility” that characterizes creative use of language and thus moves the mind beyond the values of unity, clarity, wholeness, and rationality and enables it to recover the different powers of play, inflection, pattern, surprise.

In English-speaking cultures, and situated centuries after Elizabethan English, a scientism has crept into our methodologies and into our transactions with the word that has paralyzed languages's potent energies and constrained it to a narrowly conceived representational function of conveying information. Kristeva's two "dispositions" of language, despite her unfortunate gendering of them, correspond with the dual paratactic structures of novels and films where the text consists of one system commenting on the other, positioning the reader or viewer "in the in-between" as Cixous called it, where it is possible to do the work "without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death" (Cixous, p. 883). The work of discursive creativity that takes place in that gap between what is achieved and what is possible.

The most familiar form of parataxis is parody. In modernity, parody had a somewhat unsavory reputation for the same reason that it has been favored by postmodern writers: because parody resists systemic singularity and the unities it sponsors. All parodic narrative is doubled narrative: there is a story, but also activity that runs counter to or in parallel with that story. There is anecdote, and its antidote. In classical terms, *parody* literally is the precursor or *parallel ode* by which a counter-movement is introduced. In modernity, parody increasingly lost the importance it had in earlier writing because the growing hegemony of objectifying and universalizing agendas in post-medieval Europe discussed in Chapter 1. To the modern mind, saturated in empiricism and seeking its common denominators, "parody" could seem to imply little more than a faintly unsavory undercut, a weak form of humor or joking, a sallow form of satire lacking the cultural agreements that enable satire's wit and edge. In the discursive systems of modernity parody's doubling capability lacks opportunity.

In the Discursive Condition, however, the classical genre or trope (Gr. *parodos*, literally the parallel ode in tragic drama; L. *parodia*) expands out of all recognition into richly anthematic developments that multiply many times the doubling gesture of parody. This doubling power, this power of implicating alterity, of alterna-tivity, becomes preeminent: not just in the critical vocabulary of recent decades but in the cutting edge art of the time, beginning with famous examples such as Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1896) and Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). Such works undermine single narratives in the broadest cultural sense of narrative: the narratives of order and identity and project represented by *Middlemarch* or *War and Peace*, narratives that bring absolutely everything into a single system of measurement. Their size registers the size of that feat: what it really means to have what Meyer Shapiro says of realism (Chapter 1) and of the highly developed capacity "to keep the world in mind." Historical narrative – which is what those big novels are – recovers absolutely everything into a single system of measurement.

Parodic form on the other hand undoes all this rationalization. We could say that this suits an age that suspects master-narratives, except that the point is not that such narratives are suspect but that they are impossible: something not imaginable in Jameson, perhaps not even in Lyotard. The most fully

achieved examples of pluralized plots and exfoliating styles of parataxis transcend anything that might be recognized as classical parody and turn into something quite uniquely postmodern and part of the Discursive Condition. The difference between the classical and the postmodern exploitation of parodic forms is a little like the difference in *Close Encounters of a Third Kind* between the first tentative five-note exercise from the alien space ship and the eventual massively orchestrated version of those rudimentary initial relationships. In the hands of accomplished artists, parody becomes a means for re-constructing the world. Postmodern parody thus exercises old tools in the service of a new conjugation that surprises and takes on the objectified world of humanism and history; and in the process such artists transfigure the parodic form from a dual-track to a multi-track capacity.

The history and powers of this interesting genre has been authoritatively traced, particularly to its classical sources by Margaret Rose (1979) and by Linda Hutcheon in her authoritative books on parody and postmodernism (1985, 1988). These emphasize the new epistemic roles of the classical form, the crisis of representation it provokes, and its pragmatic complexities as a contemporary tool of thought in twentieth-century writing, visual arts, and music, including the quite divergent ways in which the parodic form operates (Hutcheon, 1985, p. 99). Martin Kuester (1992), who treats parody as a special case of irony, adds the important point that parody need not necessarily be humorous, by which I take him to mean that its life-affirming pleasures go beyond the kind of weak joke that I mentioned above as a possible interpretive tendency in the project of modernity.

The problem of parallel worlds is not new; it was recognized and explored long before the Discursive Condition emerged. For seventeenth-century astronomy and theology the so-called "plurality of worlds" problem was a major dilemma as they dealt with the Copernican revolution and its implicit recognition of the many "centers" that constitute the universe – as many as the (uncountable) number of planetary or galactic systems. After the seventeenth century, while this problem remained and, for that matter, still remains, politics, art, and science have all tended to focus increasingly on the production of common denominators between systems: especially the common denominators of neutral time and neutral space as they were constructed after the Renaissance and Reformation, and later materialized, most poetically, as the fictional "aether" of Victorian science. In the twentieth century, however, the foundational issues became unavoidable. To understand relationship and adjustment within a condition of constantly multiplying "codes," the appropriate narrative format is parody. In pursuing this problematic it has been artists, not so much theorists or historians, who have most fully articulated and explored the practical issues at stake. Theorists could improve their position and avoid priestly language, and historians could find ready-made narrative methods, by taking a few more cues from the likes of Magritte, Borges, Duras, Buñuel, Cortázar, Jost, Nabokov, or Gehry.

While these requirements of the Discursive Condition may sound odd to people over thirty, they actually have become quite familiar and even second nature to the I.T. literate young. Alongside the various I.T. media, cinema has been particularly influential for more than a century in “naturalizing” experimental methods. Examples include *Lost in Translation* or *Sideways* or most of the films directed by the Coen brothers or by Tarantino or by Kieslowski. When such films finally convince the viewer to give up on plot and character, it becomes clear that the film is not “about” practice, it IS practice, and practice of a new and different kind.

An extended example is Jon Jost’s 1990 film, *All the Vermeers in New York* (U.S.); it shows how paratactic structures work in the gap between potential and enunciation that defines the Discursive Condition. It persuades us to explore this “in-between” gap – despite Johnny Mercer and his so-Modern lyric in this chapter’s epigraph, advising us not to “mess with Mr. In-between.” For those not yet familiar with Jost’s film, a meagre but instructive starting point is this description from one program guide (*Radio Times* (U.K.), Jan./Feb. 1997) which introduces it as: “a subtle and often moving story of unfulfilled love, in which the pace and emptiness of modern life is contrasted with the serenity and beauty of the paintings by Dutch artist Jan Vermeer hanging in New York’s art galleries.” With an added note about the problematic role of money, this might stand as a decent description of the film, except for one thing; it does not mention the camera—the art—the substantial construction of alternative discourse which makes a hash of this pious, completely conventional description of contents. Worse, it imports entirely conventional assumptions that do not even touch the formalities that make this film anything but conventional.

The parody in the film lies in its way of going, in other words, in what might be called the “style” except that the term has been so trivialized. In the film’s way of going, its style, the very values lamented in the so-called plot remain vigorously present in the camera work. I say “so-called plot” because the sequence here includes so much, much more than “plot” and “character,” those values imported from drama that were already inadequate for describing narrative in 1800 and that are certainly inadequate for describing film. The real “plot” here is a doubled and even multiplied sequence in which the (supposedly tragic) “failure of love in the modern world” is a lot less important than the happy, contradictory, and erotic (that is, life-sustaining) tensions between sight, sound, and explanation running in multiple parallels through the sequence. To allege contrast between the “serenity of Vermeer” and the “emptiness of modern life” actually makes very little sense, once we take into consideration the visual delight of this film. The director and editors have constructed an articulation of sight and awareness that links the film directly (not thematically or allegorically) with Vermeer, especially in its treatment of light and of object relations in space, in its respect for details of ordinary life, in its encroaching but (this is important) *non-tragic* awareness of finitude, including that ultimate finitude of death.

Various codes simultaneously include camera motion, the sound track, Vermeer's canvasses, the vestigial "love" plot, and multiple iterative sequences to do with things such as windows, shoes, New York sidewalks. The basic parodic form here consists of the commentary available *in-between* the two primary narrative codes of plot, and camera. In this *in-between* is built a rich and textured set of values, in the painter's sense of "value." Phases of order appear and disappear as various patterns develop, sometimes jointly, sometimes in passing and crossing one another without urgency or outcome. It is, to use my coinage elsewhere (1992), *della figura*, not *della pittura*: in other words, it is about the figures that emerge and dissolve, not about the picture-window-on-the-world that has been the staple of visual art in the West since Alberti. The entire film consists of intervals of order maintained by vestigial plot threads.

The first code concerns plot and a world of meaning-value in which two protagonists, a struggling French actress ("Anna") and a burnt-out New York broker ("Mark"), meet in the Metropolitan Museum of Art through their common interest in Vermeer. They meet thereafter in a café, and again in an unspecified number and kind of meetings (amounts of chronological time are unimportant) wherein the keynotes are good will and lack of communication. Each self-consciously alienated persona pursues some obscure object of desire: seeking elusive identity in a Chekhov character, a Vermeer, a face; or seeking identity apart from investments; or seeking to "own" an elusive value by competing in commodities markets or art markets (how is this show/currency selling? Who is buying? Let me buy in); or hoping to find love through a common obsession with Vermeer. This plot and its outcome remains episodic and, unlike historical narrative from Stendhal to *Star Wars*, unproductive.

The other narrative code, which comments on the first, belongs to the camera. In the manner of parody this second code runs parallel to the first and, by its very existence, produces mutual tension and commentary in-between codes. The camera moves around New York with apparent ease and delicacy, but always with restraint, never sweeping to heights or magnifying distances. This lens can make even the New York skyline look like a Vermeer: reduced from heroic materialism to a configured space by wide-angle lens and late-afternoon sun. This camera's frame and motion rigorously limit the visual horizon, and thus the expanse of neutral space in which heroics usually become possible. But this limit does not confine; it opens up a seemingly infinite world of possible sequences, codes, and values. The actual frame almost always remains portrait-sized, featuring a head or profile, respecting a figure's precarious importance, and rarely taking in more than one person at a time or even whole bodies.

With one or two exceptions at crises, when it creates alarm by panning up, the camera moves sideways, its lateral motion slow and contained, resting momentarily on a detail before it moves laterally again, often retracing its course back over now-familiar details. Its gravitational field remains an individual head or profile, where it usually comes to rest, but its motion takes

in a range of objects in enclosed spaces. For example, in one sequence in an apartment room, the camera laterals left from a stocking-ed foot propped on a bed by a girl on the floor reading, then to postcards, trainers, a bit of wood flooring in a herringbone pattern, photos, magazines, the rumpled edge of a blue bedspread; then it laterals back along the same course, this time to the sound of weeping. No zooms, no rapid breaks, no insistence on connection, no explanation of grief.

In short this camera concentrates on the details of life that “plots” tend to use as carriers or generalizations or not at all – a discarded shoe, a jet stream against almost-indifferent blue, a low-level view of a polished marble floor, the bases of apparently huge marble columns in an institutional lobby, a kind of sound, a certain angle of light. This lens appreciates painterly values of color and intensity, of configured space and proportion. While the central figures pursue their obscure objects of desire, a world of beauty lies about them, disregarded. The personae remain interesting insofar as they show some awareness of that Other world, represented to them in this case by Vermeer. They may miss the resemblance of their own world to that of the artist, but the camera picks it up for us.

This description of the film’s parodic structure however – the two systems marked by the gap between them – hardly does justice to the richness, that is, the aesthetic (that is, the moral) value of the sequence. Jost’s various visual themes recur and vary gently, just perceptibly, doubling their possible value. Money, for example, is a common currency, and perhaps the root of evil as one character muses, but it is also actual bills in a bundle, interesting in themselves and creating no desire; money is investments, but there are more kinds of investments than monetary ones; money raises questions of value, especially in the markets for selling, buying, and trading in currencies or in art.

The camera here pays affectionate attention to things much used and unnoticed by careless life: floors, for example, or windows: wood floors in herringbone patterns, grained marble floors, marble parquet floors in black and green; and windows in paintings, in apartments, in cafés, or conspicuously absent in commodities trading centers. Multiple themes exfoliate: artists (a painter, a singer, an actress) who appear not as icons or as mythologized producers of desirable objects, but as ordinary talented people with ordinary problems; pictures in museums and galleries, re-incarnated in photographs and on postcards; the framed view that emphasizes the frame. In varying frequencies objects and gestures occur and re-occur: glossy hair, telephones, upholstery, doors, platform railings along a quay or atop a skyscraper, muted colors of rose, grey, white, and beige; gestures of going through a door, looking over a shoulder, at a Vermeer.

A sequence of etched sounds, and equally etched silences, adds dimension to this already multi-dimensional visual sequence: contemporary jazz, running water, awkward voices, footfalls in a deserted museum, traffic on upper Fifth Avenue, a single low-register note with two voices, piano and cello, barely

discernable, then moving into atonal, then harmonic, and again atonal relationships. The recurrences sustained by such elements vary in their mutual complexities: the same kind of thing over and over again like a novice practicing, and yet developed to such a degree that elements disappear into something more massively fused.

This cinematic achievement is saturated with qualitative value. In the so-called plot, on the other hand, death haunts everything in the form of quantitative measure: "numbers, I'm sick of numbers," says the broker who wants to give it all up and opt for what he hopes will be love, for his Anna who has a face as beautiful as a Vermeer. His "I'm dying," on the day when his currencies investments begin to plummet, punctuates a sequence in which death, or figures of it, have been increasingly a factor. "Mark" hates being atop a skyscraper and looking at all those people all at once "it's like being dead." The emphasis falls on numbers of dollars, numbers of people, numbers of transactions that dissipate quality. The sequence then becomes a sustained search for qualitative results to escape from the realm of quantity and death.

The camera entirely reverses these plot emphases, parodying them perhaps, except that the sequences and commentaries are almost too complex for this term. Its torque and vitality depends on what is fragile, unnoticed, perishable. Whereas in the "plot" death is Big but unimportant, life is small, perishable, and very important. What "plot" relegates to margins and irrelevance, the camera recovers as exquisite in its finitude; nothing large or grand can equal the small things for vitality. Life by definition has qualities, or "values" in the painter's sense of value. With motion, light, passing contact, a magazine, a discarded shoe, a lot of construction work is going on. Material objects "much used by careless life" become what Nabokov calls "transparent things, through which the past shines" (Nabokov, 1972, Ch.1). The calm universe of value in *All The Vermeers in New York* parodies, that is, it renders amusing and even trivial, the plot of loss and alienation.

The parallel codes in Jost's film threaten to meet near the end, where the so-called plot brings the broker to the point of saying "I love you," before he collapses from too much quantity. His Anna, his obscure object of desire, responds to the call; but the irony remains. The message reaches an answering machine, and he dies before she reaches him and before he learns that her plans did not include him. The Proustian last word on value is delivered by opaque Anna's voice-over:

There is no reason inherent in the conditions of life on this earth that can make us consider ourselves obliged to do good, to be fastidious, to be polite, even; nor make the talented artist consider himself obliged to begin again a score of times a piece of work, the admiration aroused by which will matter little to his body devoured by worms. Like the patch of yellow wall painted with so much knowledge and skill by an artist who must forever remain unknown and is barely identified under the name, Vermeer.

What remains of “reason” in this film are the exquisitely meaningless details of ordinary life. As in the work of so many artists of the Discursive Condition, this film uses alphabetical elements slowly to constitute a discursive universe, deploying those elements in ever-more complicated systems of relationship. Like those artists this director uses parodic form to deny priority to a single sequence or narrative. The doubled and redoubled sequence always presents alternatives to any particular selection, so that the selective act of attention itself, and its capacity for “so much knowledge and skill” becomes the focus of interest.

Such paratactic texts, by negotiating shifts between parallel systems and sequences, achieve exactly that kind of discursive in-between “writing” that Cixous speaks of. Parodic undercut is only the rudimentary beginning of this pluralizing format in which the original parody gets subsumed in the vibrant play of values that constitutes the chief quality of this art. Such forms make quite complex new demands on attention and recognition: demands that go to the foundation of order: what Robbe-Grillet calls “an obscure enterprise of form.” They preserve particulars from being eroded by an order of “meaning” production and allows them instead to function, in their particularity and discreteness, as the basis for a new kind of order.

Political life ceaselessly obliges us to assume certain known significations: social, historical, moral. Art is more modest – or more ambitious: in art, nothing is ever known in advance. Before the work of art there is nothing – no certainty, no thesis, no message. To believe that the novelist has “something to say” and that he then looks for a way to say it represents the gravest of misconceptions. For it is precisely this “way,” this manner of speaking, which constitutes his enterprise as a writer, an enterprise more obscure than any other, and which will later be the uncertain content of his book. Ultimately it is perhaps this uncertain content of an obscure enterprise of form which will best serve the cause of freedom. But who knows how long that will take?

(Robbe-Grillet, pp. 41–42)

The discursive activity required by Jost’s film engages us, not in a replication of an existing, “objective” order but, instead, in the process of order-making itself. That is what Art accomplishes. That is what the creative Act accomplishes. That is what, in the Discursive Condition, makes enunciation the only possible site of choice and change.

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Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, University of Edinburgh, UK, and Trent University, Canada, teaches and writes about interdisciplinary cultural history and theory.

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